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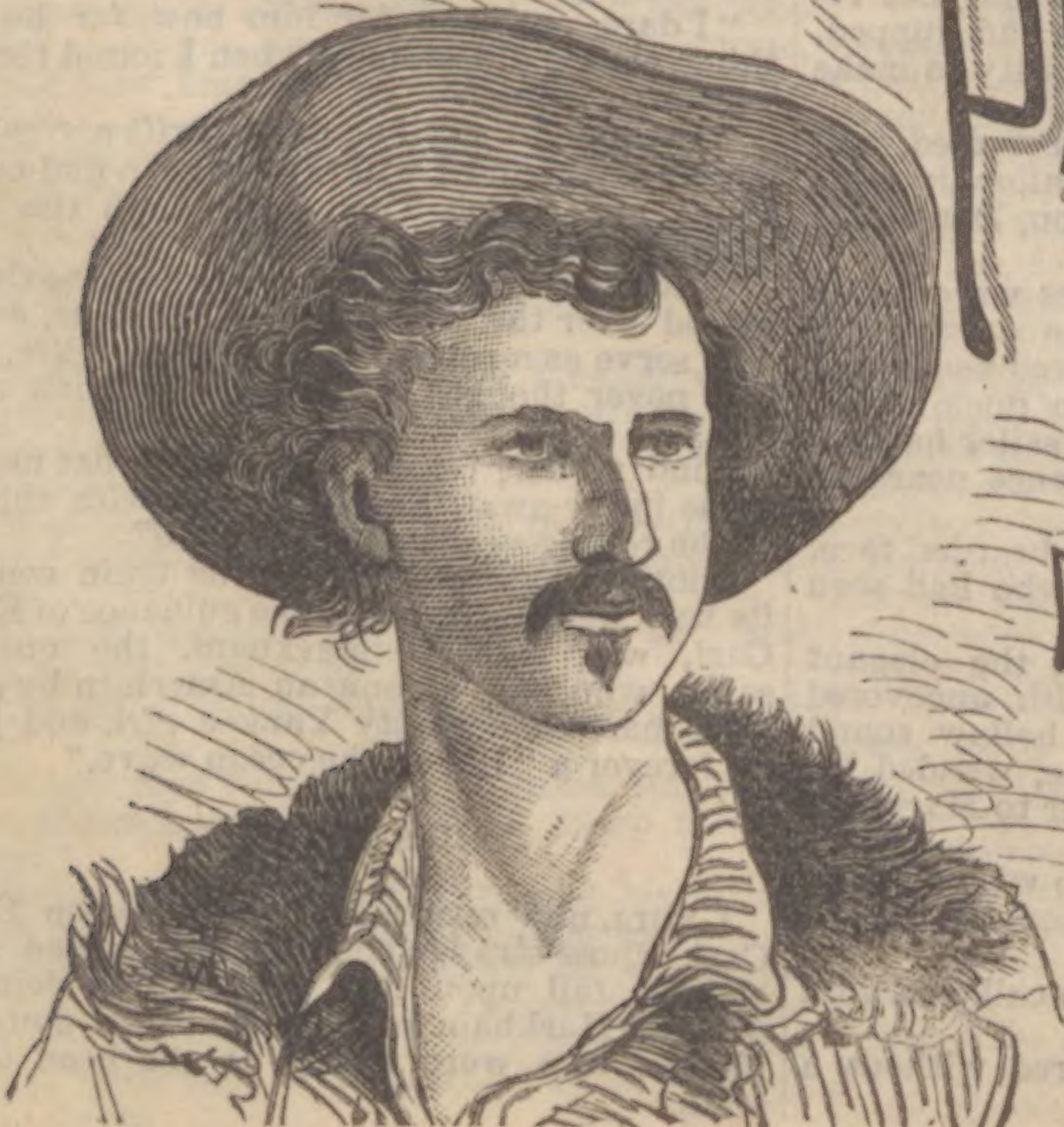
No. 329

THE LEAGUE



OR THREE

OR BUFFALO BILL'S PLEDGE



Texas Jack.

BY



COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

Buffalo Bill.

Wild Bill.

The League of Three; OR, BUFFALO BILL'S PLEDGE.

A Story of a Trail Followed to the Bitter
End by the Three Famous Scouts,
Buffalo Bill, Wild Bill and
Texas Jack, the "Prin-
ces of the Plains."

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "WILD BILL, THE PISTOL DEAD
SHOT," "MERLE, THE MUTINEER," "GOLDI
PLUMB, THE BOY BANDIT," "BISON
BILL, PRINCE OF THE REINS,"
"CRIMSON KATE," "LONE
STAR, THE COWBOY
CAPTAIN," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE RANCHERO'S TRAIN.

"FATHER, you seem worried."

"I must frankly confess that I am, Madge, for, though a stranger in this wild land of the West, I am certain that something is going wrong."

"But what, father?"

"You remember that the gentleman, whose ranch I bought, gave me what he called a map of the trail we were to follow?"

"Yes, sir."

"Here it is, and it keeps tally with our course, according to each day's travel, up to yesterday, and then I noticed that our guide took a different route, which is not laid out here."

"As to day's course was also wholly at variance with the map, I spoke to him about it, and he said he was not a paper guide, and knew his trail thoroughly."

"Perhaps he does, father, and the map may be wrong."

"No, Madge, for Waller told me he took the trail, as marked down, every time he went to and from Omaha, and if I followed his directions I needed no guide, and now we are many, many miles away from it, heading up the north fork of the Loup river, when we should be following the Platte."

"What do the teamsters say, sir?"

"They say the guide is wrong."

"Yet he should know."

"He does know, Madge."

"Father, you have some secret you are keeping from me."

"I will tell you all, for you are a brave girl, Madge, and your advice will aid me."

"I will do all in my power to aid you, father, and what you do must be done promptly, if you suspect the guide, for this is no country to be at the mercy of an evil man, sir."

"Well, yesterday morning, you know, I gave chase to an antelope, and it led me some distance from camp."

"Upon returning I saw two horsemen talking earnestly together, and I halted and leveled my glass. One was Kiowa Carl, our guide."

"And the other?"

"Was a stranger, Madge, and, as well as I could judge with my glass, at the distance I stood, a most villainous-looking fellow."

"Not one of our train, then?"

"No; for I never saw him before."

"Did you speak with them?"

"No, Madge; I saw them talking earnestly together, as I rode on to camp, and shortly after the guide came into camp and alone."

"This was strange."

"Yes, when you take into consideration that we are far from any settlement, or even habitation, and meeting a person on the prairie that way, it seemed but natural to bring him into camp."

"So I would think, sir; but did you not speak to the guide about the stranger?"

"Not directly; but I asked him if there were any ranches near and he said no. I then asked if it was probable for us to meet any one on our route, and he answered that we might strike a train, or perhaps a band of roving red-skins, but no one else."

"And he did not speak of his meeting the stranger?"

"He did not."

"This looks strange, indeed, father."

"And stranger still, when he at once, upon our starting, left the trail I have marked down on my map by Waller, and took this course up the Loup."

"When we camp to-night I should demand of him, as is your right, why he has thus led you off from what you know to be the direct trail, and ask who it was that he was talking to upon the prairie yesterday morning."

"I will do so, for I confess I am worried at his conduct."

"Yet he was well recommended to you, father."

"Yes, by others of his stripe, and from the day we started I have not liked him."

"Nor I, for I can only see his eyes beneath

his bushy hair and immense beard, and they have a glitter I do not like."

"Sh! there he comes," and the father and daughter relapsed into silence as the subject of their conversation approached them.

The father was an elderly gentleman of fifty, with a genial, fine face, and the air of one who had lived well and was in good circumstances. He was dressed in corduroy, top boots, and wore on his head the Western sombrero, and around his waist a belt of arms. He was well mounted upon a large roan mare, and at his saddle-born hung a lariat and a repeating rifle.

The daughter was a maiden of nineteen, with dark, violet eyes, shaded by sweeping lashes, the flush of perfect health upon her face, which the prairie sun had turned brown as a berry, and one who, in any assemblage, would have been pronounced a decided beauty.

Her face was frank, fearless and kind, and the merry twinkle that flashed in her eyes showed that life had held for her far more roses than thorns.

She was dressed in a gray corduroy riding-habit, which showed her faultless form in every graceful motion, and her small hands were incased in gauntlet kid gloves, while her head was sheltered by a gray sombrero, the broad brim looped up upon the left side with a gold pin, a miniature spur, and upon the other side was a heavy black plume that touched her shoulder.

Her horse was a dark chestnut, and, like her father's, showed the thoroughbred blood.

Behind these two came an army ambulance, drawn by a pair of immense mules, and driven by a negro, and in it was seated a prim-looking lady who might be classed among that much-abused army of virgins known as "old maids."

She was dressed in similar style to the youngest maiden, riding-habit and all, though she never had been on horseback in her life, but the dress-maker had a different form to fit in making her dress, and the angles would show here and there.

Behind this ambulance came a second, also drawn by mule, but with a roguish-faced youth as driver, and a negro woman as passenger, and a glance was sufficient to show that she was in her right element, as around her were innumerable utensils of a culinary nature.

Following the ambulances came six "prairie schooners," in Western parlance, but which, upon being interpreted, meant wagons with white tilts, or coverings of canvas.

These were evidently heavily loaded, and drawn by "spiked" teams of mules and horses, four animals being hitched to each vehicle, while the drivers were real types of the border teamsters, rough-faced, roughly-clad men, all thoroughly armed.

In the last wagon were visible several sheep, hogs, and a coop of chickens, and another of ducks and geese, while behind it were half a dozen fine horses and as many cattle, all of which went to prove that the gentleman at the head of the train was going to make himself comfortable in the border home toward which he was wending his way.

There is another person to describe and the train and its people will be complete, and that personage is Kiowa Carl, the guide, whose mysterious conduct had brought suspicion upon him.

CHAPTER II.

A LEAF FROM THE BYGONE.

MR. MABREY MARKHAM was an Englishman by birth, whose father had sent him to sea before the mast, to "make a man of him," he said, while a brother, some six years his senior, had been kept at home and reared to become "a gentleman," which would fit him as heir to the Markham estate.

The young Mabrey had felt his father's unkindness to him so deeply that he did not return home in the ship in which he had shipped, but went off on his own responsibility to make a name and a fortune for himself.

Some ten years after, his father died, and not having heard of the young sailor since his departure, he left to his eldest son, Daniel, his entire fortune.

At the funeral, as the services were being read by the clergyman, and the aristocratic assemblage were sitting with bowed heads and feigned grief, a seafaring man, in duck pants, blue woolen shirt, black tie, and sailor hat, entered and stood in respectful silence near the door.

He was a stranger to all, with a bearded face, sober mien, and the air of one who had seen better days.

He followed the cortege from the elegant mansion to the grave, stood with uncovered head while the clouds fell with hollow sound upon the coffin, and then, alone, wended his way back to the home of the heir to Markham Manor.

The proud butler looked at him with a supercilious glance, when he asked to see Mr. Daniel Markham, and said:

"You must be an ignoramus to call on a gent in his deep grief, to beg alms."

The sailor smiled, and answered without a show of anger:

"Abner, go and tell Daniel Markham that his brother Mabrey would like to see him."

The butler started, glanced earnestly into the bearded face, and saw in the man a resemblance to the boy, and said quickly:

"Pardon me, Master Mabrey, but I did not recognize you, sir, you have changed so. I'll tell the master, sir, and he'll be glad to see you."

The butler disappeared, and soon returned with the message:

"The master says he does not wish to be disturbed by beggars, even if they are of his kin, and that he will not see you now, or at any other time, but to give you this ten-pound note, and tell you to leave."

The butler had resumed his proud manner, and held forth the bank-note with the air of a prince conferring a favor upon a poor servitor.

Again the sailor smiled, but almost immediately his smile turned to a look of intense sadness, and his face grew ashen pale; but he said after an effort, and his voice trembled:

"Give me a pen, ink and paper, Abner."

The butler seemed inclined to refuse, but there was that in the look and manner of the seaman that commanded respect, and he bowed and obeyed.

At the hall table Mabrey Markham sat down and wrote something on the leaf of a book he took from his pocket.

This leaf he tore out, and then upon the piece of paper brought by the butler he wrote:

"MARKHAM MANOR,

"June 10th, 18—.

"BROTHER:—

"After ten long years of absence I returned home in time to see my father buried, and to be refused admission into my boyhood's home by you."

"I came not to seek alms, nor to beg to share with you an inheritance which I could justly claim with you; but to revisit old scenes, to beg forgiveness of my father and of you, for not having in all these years, let you know that I was alive and nappy."

"The silent lips of my father gave me no welcome, and from your lips has only insult come."

"But I forgive you, brother, and bid you farewell."

"Yet I leave with you a commission to execute, and that is, to place above the grave of our parents a monument with this inscription:

"TO THE MEMORY

OF

DANIEL MARKHAM, AND HIS WIFE, MARGARET,

This Monument is Erected

BY

THEIR SON, MABREY."

"Within this note you will find my draft on the Bank of England for two thousand pounds to defray the cost of the monument, the design of which I leave to your taste."

"Do this for me, brother, and never more will you hear from MABREY MARKHAM."

The sailor handed his letter to the butler, and without a word turned upon his heel and departed from the home of his boyhood.

And the rich heir cast aside the note given him by the butler, and paced to and fro with moody brow, for remembrance of the past welled up before him, and he recalled the scenes of their younger years together, when he had really loved the bright-faced boy, his younger brother, who had followed him on so many hunting and fishing tramps.

At last his human nature prevailed over sordid avarice, and he said:

"I will send after poor Mabrey, beg him to forgive me, and share with him the fortune, one-half of which is justly his due, and then I certainly will have enough."

He seized the letter then and read it with a look of intense surprise, and glanced at the check.

"Great God! I have made a mistake, and a bitter one."

"Mabrey came not to ask aid, for he is rich, I should think, if he can give so large a sum to the memory of our parents."

"I dare not send for him now, for he will think that I did so, only when I found that he was not a pauper."

"Let him go, until again we drift across each other's path, and I will take care to find out all about him, which I can do through the bank where he has his deposits."

"And I will erect the monument he desires placed over the grave of our parents, and it will serve as a rebuke to me through life, for I had never thought of so honoring their memory."

Kind reader, I hear you ask "what has this scene in far-away England, to do with this tale of the rolling prairies of America?"

Simply, that the chief of the train wending its way westward, under the guidance of Kiowa Carl, was Mabrey Markham, the one-time sailor, who had become an American by adoption, married a pretty Yankee girl, and given up forever a "life on the ocean wave."

CHAPTER III.

KIOWA CARL.

I WILL now return to the time when Kiowa Carl, whose strange conduct had caused suspicion to fall upon him, rode up to join Mr. Mabrey Markham and his beautiful daughter, Madge, who were riding at the head of the train.

"Well, guide, is there any news?" asked Mr. Markham, as the guide rode back and joined them.

The one he addressed was mounted upon a large, long-bodied, gaunt black, that showed both speed and endurance, and his bridle and saddle trappings were really elegant.

The rider was a man of fine physique, broad-shouldered, and with a face that was hidden beneath a mass of beard, long hair, and the fact that his broad-brimmed sombrero came to his eyebrows, leaving only a pair of dark, piercing eyes revealed.

He was dressed in a buckskin jacket, leggings, stuck in his boot-tops, and his blue woolen shirt was open at the neck, displaying his broad, massive chest.

A repeating rifle and lariat hung to his saddle-horn, and a pair of revolvers and bowie were in his belt, and he looked the man to use the weapons.

He said he had passed long years on the prairie, knew the language of half a dozen Indian tribes, and could not be lost on the border, but more than this he did not say of himself, and was withal a silent man, with a reserve which no one had broken through, unless it was Madge Markham, and toward her he had shown that whatever he might then be he had, in the past, led a far different life, for he had told her tales of other lands in which he had traveled, sung for her at night around the camp-fire, and in every way in his power had tried to ingratiate himself into her favor.

But Madge admired his nerve, praised his deadly aim with pistol and rifle, flattered him upon his superb horsemanship, thought him handsome and agreeable, yet could not bring herself to like him.

There was something far back in his dark eyes she feared and could not understand.

After the death of his wife, the mother of Madge, Mr. Markham's home had been broken up, and the father and daughter had traveled for more than a year.

But, his means being limited, he had determined to settle down, and had purchased from a friend a cattle ranch in Nebraska, hoping to make there a happy home for himself and Madge.

With every comfort, and many luxuries, he had started for the ranch, and Kiowa Carl had been the guide he had selected to take him there with his train, which, besides his teamsters, who were to remain as cowboys at the ranch, consisted of a distant relative of his wife, Miss Samantha Doolittle of New Hampshire, who acted as housekeeper.

Then there were Don Caesar de Bazan, a negro factotum, who was known under the more familiar title of "Coon," and his wife, Dorothy de Bazan.

The youth driving the second ambulance was a wail whom Mr. Markham had picked up in Omaha before starting, and answered to the spicy appellation of Pepper.

Having now made the reader acquainted with those who are to figure prominently in my romance of the "land of the setting sun," I will now give Kiowa Carl's answer to the question of Mr. Markham's:

"Well, guide, is there any news?"

"This is not the place to get the daily papers in, Mr. Markham," was the somewhat rude reply.

"Yet it is a place where it behooves one to look after his own safety, and not leave it wholly in the hands of others, so I ask why you have left the trail marked out on my map?" and it was evident that Mr. Markham was nettled.

Noticing the manner of his employer, with a quick glance at Madge, the guide answered, in an earnest tone:

"Mr. Markham, as I told you before, I am no paper guide, but one who acts for the good of my employer, and, as you seem to doubt me, I will now frankly tell you why I left the trail."

"I will hear you with pleasure, sir," was the cold reply.

"I learned, through a courier crossing the country, that there were Indians on the lower trail, and hence I made this *détour*."

"Ah! then—"

"I did not tell you, sir, for I cared not to alarm you, or Miss Markham, needlessly, and by making a circuit up the Loup I hoped to avoid all danger."

"Forgive me, guide, for I frankly confess that I doubted you," said Mr. Markham, honestly.

"I must ask for forgiveness also, sir," said Madge, with one of her sweet smiles.

The guide smiled and bowed, but said, quietly:

"I will now ride to yonder motte you see in the distance, and lay out a camp for the night."

Without another word he turned his horse's head and rode away at a swinging lope, while the train followed more slowly on, the father and daughter conversing earnestly together, and regretting the wrong they had done their guide, until they were startled by a loud cry from Coon:

"Massa Markham! Massa Markham!"

Quickly they turned, while Mr. Markham asked:

"Well, Coon, what is it?"

"Dat white boy, what sees eberyting, done say dar am a man on hossback a-comin', sah."

"Yes, I see him."

"He is coming rapidly on our trail, Madge, so let us ride back to meet him," and the father and daughter turned their horses to meet the stranger, who was coming at a swift gallop toward the train.

CHAPTER IV.

THE STRANGE HORSEMAN.

THE strange horseman, whose evident pursuit of the train had just caught the ever-watchful eyes of the youth, Pepper, came up with the straggling cattle just as Mr. Markham and Madge got there.

Both father and daughter gave expression to their surprise and admiration by a slight exclamation, as their eyes fell upon the superb-looking man before them.

He reined his horse back to a halt, raised his broad sombrero, and bent low in his saddle at sight of Madge, a courtly salute which the maiden returned with a gracious bow, and her father by touching his hat.

The horse, a steed as white as milk, and with a long flowing mane and tail, did not seem in the least fatigued by his rapid gallop, and arched his proud neck and seemed the personification of animal beauty, as was his master of manly strength and elegance.

The attire of the stranger was fancy and handsome enough for a *bal masque* costume, being a mixture of Mexican and frontier garb, to which was added cavalry boots, with massive spurs of gold, a plumed sombrero of dove-colored felt, encircled by a gold cord, and looped up on one side by a pin of solid gold, representing a buffalo, with large diamonds for eyes, amber for horns, and rubies to give the red glare to the nostrils.

It was certainly a unique and costly trinket for a borderman to wear; but was in keeping with the diamond solitaire that glimmered in his black silk necktie, and a chain of massive links of gold that encircled his neck and had attached to it a watch which was hidden in the fob in his hunting-shirt.

His feet were small and shapely, his hands incased in gauntlet gloves, and his whole bearing in keeping with a man who did as he pleased, asked no favors, or mercy of pale-face or red-skin, and lived without fear.

All this both Mr. Markham and Madge took in at a glance, as the man approached; but when he drew nearer and they gazed into his face mentally they confessed that they were gazing upon a most remarkable personage, for no woman could have possessed more clearly cut features, or eyes more expressive and full of feeling.

His mouth, slightly stern, was half hidden beneath a dark, silken mustache, and his resolute, well-rounded chin by an imperial, while his hair was waving, and fell down his back half-way to his waist, a circumstance which, when one did not gaze fully in his face, gave him a look of effeminacy.

But one look into his large earnest eyes, and the stern, somewhat reckless, dare-devilish mouth, and it would be a most casual observer that would set him down as other than a true man, a Prince of the Plains.

Fully six feet in height, and shaped like an Apollo, it was no wonder that he, at a glance, won the admiration of Mr. Markham and Madge.

"Pardon me, sir, but may I ask who is chief of this train?" asked the strange horseman in a clear, tenor-like voice.

"I am, sir," said Mr. Markham in reply.

"I hope, sir, it is not your intention to attempt a settlement upon the Loup, as your course implies?" resumed the stranger in an inquiring way.

"By no means, sir, for I am bound to a ranch I have purchased upon the Platts."

"The Platte, sir?"

"Yes, for I have purchased the Waller ranch and its cattle."

"The Platte, sir, is not in this direction," said the stranger with some surprise.

"So I know, sir, but my guide, who has ridden on ahead to find a camping-ground for the night, makes this *détour* to avoid bands of Indians on the direct trail," explained Mr. Markham, while Madge sat on her horse attentively regarding the strange horseman, who, interested apparently in what her father said, did not glance toward her.

"Why I have just come from Fort McPherson along the river trail, and have seen no traces of red-skins, nor heard of any at Fort Kearney, when I halted there, for I am bearing dispatches, sir, from McPherson to Omaha."

"My guide met some one who told him there were Indians on our trail."

"He was misinformed, I assure you, sir, for there is no man on the border that knows better than I the movements of the hostiles."

This was said with no air of braggadocio, and Mr. Markham replied:

"That being the case, we have come a long way off our course for nothing."

"You have indeed, sir, and another day on this trail will take you right into the Indian country, where your train would fall an easy prey to massacre."

"My dear sir, you surprise me, for I cannot understand how my guide can have been so ignorant of the facts you state."

"Who is your guide, may I ask?"

"He is known in Omaha, where I engaged him, as Kiowa Carl."

Both Mr. Markham and Madge saw the start the stranger gave, while he answered promptly:

"I know him, sir, as an infamous scoundrel, and he bears upon his right ear my mark."

"That man, sir, was leading you into a trap, for he is friendly with old Black Face, the chief of the tribe into whose clutches this trail will take you."

These words fell like a thunder-clap upon both Mr. Markham and Madge, and they sat staring in amazement upon the strange horseman before them.

CHAPTER V.

THE PRINCE OF THE PLATTE.

"My dear sir, you astound me," at last Mr. Markham found words to say.

"Kiowa Carl would have astounded you still more, sir, had I not struck your trail, and knowing that no train should come up here, feared you were lost, and came on to warn you."

"And most heartily do I thank you, sir, for your manner, your face, carry conviction with all you say."

"I also join my father, sir, in thanking you," said Madge, softly.

The stranger's face flushed, and he said quickly:

"I seek not thanks, nor do I want them, for doing my duty."

"My orders are imperative to press on to Omaha, but I felt I would not be doing my duty to allow you to go on this trail, when I knew your force, so came to warn you."

"May I ask how you knew what force I had?" asked Mr. Markham.

"It is as plain to me, sir, as is the lightning and thunder a precursor of a storm, for I read trails as an open book."

"See, there are the trails of your ambulances and wagons, half blurred out by a few cattle, and I knew that you could not have more than a dozen fighting men, which in this country would be a mere handful against old Black Face and his braves, more especially if you were led into an ambush."

"I see, sir, that you read signs on the prairie as one would an open book, for my fighting force does not number a dozen all told."

"You say that your guide has gone on to prepare you a camping-place?"

"Yes, so he said."

"The more likely to arrange his red allies into an ambush for you."

Both Mr. Markham and Madge paled slightly, while the former said anxiously:

"Then what is to be done, sir?"

For a moment the stranger was silent, and then he said:

"If you ask my advice, sir, it is to go no further."

"Yet your duty will not permit you to guide us?"

"No, it will not, I regret to say, unless—"

He paused, and Madge quickly said:

"Your manner implies that there is a possibility that you may do so."

"Lady, were your father alone—that is, were there only men in this train—I would set them on the right trail and let them look to their manhood and prowess to pull through all right."

"But with yourself and, as I see, another lady in the train, I feel that it is my duty to make every sacrifice."

"But first we will settle about Kiowa Carl and then I will decide what is best to be done."

"And what would you advise about him?" asked Mr. Markham.

"Catch him," was the laconic response.

"But how?"

"He has gone to yonder motte!"

"So he said."

"He is not in sight on the prairie."

"No; he was just disappearing when we sighted you."

"Then he does not know of my coming?"

"He cannot possibly do so."

"Then we'll fetch him back to the train."

"Yet how can we do so?"

"Halt your train, call all your men about one wagon, as though it had broken down, and then wait until he discovers that you are delayed."

"Well, sir?"

"Naturally he will return, and here on the open prairie you have him at your mercy."

"And you advise that we seize him?"

"Oh, no, sir; I will do that."

"You?"

"Yes; leave him to me, for I will keep in the background until the proper moment to act."

"And then?"

"And then you will see that he knows who I am, and that I am aware that he is a black-hearted villain."

"You will not kill him?" said Madge, timidly.

"No, miss, for I never take the life of a human being without it is absolutely necessary," was the response; and Madge breathed more freely, as she had feared she would be compelled to witness one of those dread scenes for which the far frontier was noted, and of which she had incidentally heard so much.

"I will at once do as you suggest, sir," said Mr. Markham, and he rode forward and halted the train, for the three had been riding at the rear, during the conversation that took place.

In a few moments the train had come to a halt, Mr. Markham had explained to the men the tidings brought by the strange horseman, and all gathered around one of the wagons, as though engaged in mending a broken-down vehicle.

Back in the rear the stranger waited, standing by the side of his superb horse, and conversing with Mr. Markham and Madge.

Eagerly Mr. Markham watched for the returning form of the guide, and thus nearly an hour passed away.

At last the eye of the stranger, as powerful in sight as a glass, caught sight of the guide, and he said simply:

"He is coming."

"Ah! I see him now," and Mr. Markham gazed earnestly at him through his field-glass, as did also Madge, who remarked:

"You have marvelous eyes, sir, for he is yet very far off."

"And is returning at a gallop, which will bring him here in half an hour."

"You have indeed superb sight, sir," said Mr. Markham.

"The sight of the prairie-man, sir, as with the sailor, improves by long practice in searching vast expanses, where a failure to detect a foe brings death, hence it is most necessary to cultivate one's vision, and though I carry a glass, it is seldom I need its use," was the reply.

"Well, sir, have you decided upon what you shall do when the guide returns?" asked Mr. Markham somewhat nervously, as the returning forms of horse and rider grew each instant more distinct.

"Yes, sir."

"May I ask what it is you will do?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Please go forward with your daughter to where the men are, and when Kiowa Carl comes up and asks the cause of your delay, simply tell him that you have decided to retrace your trail and take the right one along the Platte."

"And then?"

"I will attend to the balance, sir," was the calm reply.

Mr. Markham nodded, and rode forward with Madge, leaving the stranger concealed behind the rear wagon.

A quarter of an hour passed, the whole party gathered in a group about the center of the train, and waiting somewhat nervously the coming of the guide, whom all seemed to fear.

Presently up he dashed, and asked sternly:

"What means this long halt here, when there is hardly time to reach a camping-ground before night?"

"It means, Kiowa Carl, that I have decided to go no further upon this trail," was Mr. Markham's firm response.

"Ha! do you intend to assume the duties of guide, sir?" was the angry response.

Mr. Markham hesitated, and then came in deep tones:

"No, but I do, Kiowa Carl."

The man started back, jerking cruelly upon his rein until he forced his horse upon his haunches, and while his face became pallid, cried in startled tones:

"Great God! Buffalo Bill, the Prince of the Platte!"

The stranger had stepped boldly out before him, from behind one of the wagons, and held his revolver leveled at the guide.

His face was smiling now, and he answered in a free and easy way:

"Correct, Kiowa Carl, and I have the drop on you."

CHAPTER VI.

THE TRAITOR GUIDE.

"BUFFALO BILL!"

The voices of the teamsters uttered the word in chorus, for the name, spoken by Kiowa Carl, had told who was the stranger, and all knew him well by reputation, though not one of the train had before seen him, excepting the traitor guide.

Kiowa Carl was a man of consummate nerve, and he regained his coolness at once almost, and said in as free and easy way as that in which Buffalo Bill had addressed him:

"Yes, and it is not the first time you have had the drop on me, Cody."

"And I warn you to beware of the third," was Buffalo Bill's response.

"Yes, for the tide must turn; but what means this attack on me now?"

"It means that I have caught you at your old tricks of deviltry, and thwarted you."

"To what do you refer?"

"You were leading this train into an ambush, at the head of which, doubtless, was your old red-skin friend Black Face."

The guide turned deadly pale at this bold accusation, but no muscle of his face quivered as he said savagely:

"You have no proof of this, Buffalo Bill."

"By the Rocky Mountains! but I will have, though, before another sun shall rise."

"Up with your hands, sir!"

The last was given in a tone that was decided.

The guide hesitated, and Buffalo Bill repeated:

"Up with your hands, Kiowa Carl!"

"You have no right to make me a prisoner."

"I assert that right, sir! Will you obey?"

"No! and I call on my employer and his men to aid me against you," Carl cried, sliding from his horse and confronting the scout.

"They will do nothing, and if you love life, worthless as yours is, I shall tell you but once more to throw up those blood-stained hands of yours."

"Obey, or take the consequences."

The revolver was held as firmly as though in a vise, and all saw that Buffalo Bill meant all he said.

Wholly at Buffalo Bill's mercy Kiowa Carl, with a bitter execration, raised his hands above his head.

Stepping forward, it was but the work of an instant for Buffalo Bill to disarm him, and then, taking the lariat from his saddle-horn he ordered the guide to remount his horse, which Kiowa did with a smothered curse. Once again in the saddle Buffalo Bill bound him securely hand and foot, tying his feet beneath his horse.

"Now you are safe for the present, and if my suspicions are verified this night, with the permission of this gentleman I will shoot you as I would a mad-dog."

Then turning to Mr. Markham, Buffalo Bill continued:

"I would advise you, sir, to at once follow your tracks back to the regular trail, pressing on until you reach your camp of last night, even if darkness overtakes you."

"But we will have no guide, sir, and—"

"If this man does not lead you back to that camp, then I will kill him, so help me Heaven."

"Do you hear me, Kiowa Carl?"

"I do."

"See to it, then, that this train goes not again off the trail, if you value life."

"And where do you go?" asked Kiowa Carl.

"That is my business; but rest assured I will be on hand to execute sentence against you if you play any of your tricks."

"You will return soon, sir, I hope, for your words imply that you intend leaving us?" said Mr. Markham.

"Yes, sir, by daylight, or soon after, I will be back."

"Yet, should I not, press on once more, and I will join you at your next camping-place."

Raising his broad sombrero, with a smile and bow, he called to his horse, and throwing himself into the saddle, dashed away across the prairie, while Mr. Markham, trusting implicitly in the man, put his train to the right about and began retracing his trail down the Loup.

CHAPTER VII.

A STRANGE METAMORPHOSIS.

BUFFALO BILL had ridden but a short distance from the train when he came to a sudden halt, and there sat in his saddle, like a man in deep thought.

After a minute's halt he turned his horse and galloped back toward the train.

Surprised at his return, Mr. Markham halted the train, and when he came up asked:

"Well, sir, have you changed your mind about going on?"

"No, sir, but I would like to have you move the train on, excepting one wagon and your traitor guide."

Mr. Markham seemed surprised, but gave the orders at once for the rear wagon to stop back for awhile, and he and Kiowa Carl, whose bridle-rein was hitched to the back of the wagon also did so.

"What does that strange man intend now?" murmured Madge, as she rode on, riding by the side of the ambulance in which sat Miss Samantha Doolittle, the old maid housekeeper, who was in ecstasies over the physique and handsome face of Buffalo Bill.

"Kiowa Carl, I will trouble you to change horses with me," said Buffalo Bill, quietly.

The guide looked at him with surprise, and said in a surly tone:

"Why ask what you have the power to do without the asking?"

"And I will also change clothing with you, and borrow your arms, for I know you are a man to keep only the best of weapons."

"In Satan's name, do you intend to rob me?"

"No, Kiowa Carl, for I leave mine in the train."

"Quick, off with your duds, or I will help you."

"I will not."

"Do you mean it?"

"I do, for I shall not aid you in any devilish trick you may have formed to ruin me."

"I will take them off of you."

"You cannot."

There was a tone of defiance in the voice of the man in spite of his bonds, and Buffalo Bill answered:

"Mr. Markham, I hate to hit a man when he is down, but I must do it."

"Again, Kiowa Carl, will you exchange clothing with me?"

"You have my answer."

Quick as a flash the iron arm of Buffalo Bill shot forth, straight from the shoulder, and the knuckles of steel fell full in the unprotected face of the prisoner.

Like a log he dropped to the ground, and instantly Buffalo Bill bent over him and after undoing the lariat coils quickly disrobed him of his outer clothing and bat.

"I hope you have not killed him, for he fell like a dead man," said Mr. Markham, who could not understand the strange conduct of Buffalo Bill.

"No fear of that, sir. I struck him to save a struggle, for I saw that he would not yield, and I merely stunned him."

"But what is your intention, sir?"

"You shall see."

Throwing off his own outer clothing Buffalo Bill said to the teamster:

"Here, pard, pull these on him."

"I'm durned ef I dress him up in your rig, Buffalo Bill, fer he don't deserve it; but I has some old togs in the wagin as will do as well, an' they'll astonish him, fer they belonged ter a honest citizen, which are myself," replied the teamster, and he dragged out a pair of coarse pants, a slouch hat, full of holes, and a woolen shirt, and began to pull them upon the still unconscious man, while Buffalo Bill was rigging himself out in the clothing of the guide.

"Thar, now he do look well, an' you must take keer, Buffler Bill, yer don't let ther devilment in them clo's strike in, fer it are a disease that are ketchin'."

Both Buffalo Bill and Mr. Markham laughed at the advice of the worthy teamster, and the latter said:

"I do not know, sir, what your intention is, but I shall take care of your clothing and arms for you until you come to claim them."

Buffalo Bill made no reply, but stepping to his saddle pocket drew forth what appeared to be a bundle of hair.

But, upon unrolling it, it proved to be a long false beard, of almost the exact hue of that of Kiowa Carl.

"Oh, curse you!"

The oath came from the guide, who had suddenly returned to consciousness, and readily understood what his enemy intended.

"Ha! ha! Kiowa Carl, I can play you pretty well, can't I?" and Buffalo Bill rumbled up his hair, put on the false beard, pulled the slouch hat over his eyes, and did look the very counterpart of the traitor guide.

Taking the weapons and horse of Kiowa Carl, and leaving his own in the care of Mr. Markham, he rode away once more, and so much resembled the traitor guide that the rest of those in the train, seeing him depart, believed that for some reason Buffalo Bill had returned and set the prisoner free.

After watching him for some moments, in company with the teamster, and the prisoner himself, Mr. Markham rode on after the train, and all were surprised at the change that had taken place, and which Seedy Sam, the wagon driver, explained in his quaint way to his pards, while Madge heard from her father's lips what had occurred.

CHAPTER VIII.

BUFFALO BILL'S RUSE.

THE sun was casting long shadows across the prairie, of the daring rider and his horse, as they moved on up the Loup.

It was very evident that, in changing his clothing for that of Kiowa Carl, Buffalo Bill intended some bold ruse, and his words as he rode along, spoken half aloud, showed what his intention was.

"I am confident," he muttered, "that old Black Face lies concealed in the timber yonder, with a score or two of braves, and that Kiowa Carl was leading the train into the ambush, and was to share spoils with the red-skins."

"Great heavens! what a fate would that beautiful girl have suffered!"

"I shudder to think of it, and if I am right, Kiowa Carl will do no more harm in this world, once I lay my clutch upon him again."

"Now I'll see if I am right before the sun is set half an hour, and if my rig will bear muster with old Black Face."

He then rode quietly on, the timber ahead rising before him dark and threatening, and his keen eyes searching its depths for some sign of a foe.

As the sun touched the distant prairie horizon, he was within a mile of the timber, which jutted out from the river to a considerable distance, and formed a secure hiding-place for a thousand savage foes within the shadow of its large trees and thickets.

After long and untiring peering into the tim-

ber, Buffalo Bill was rewarded by discovering a moving form.

"Injun!"

The word escaped his lips like an exclamation, and peering still more closely, he continued:

"As I thought, Kiowa Carl meant devilry."

"Ah! there come several of the red rascals to meet me, or rather to meet him, as they believe, or I am mistaken."

"Now, Buffalo Bill, you are placing your head in the lion's mouth, and look out, or it may be snapped off."

With a light laugh, as though he relished and defied the great danger he was running, Buffalo Bill arranged his toilet more to his taste, as he deemed it necessary, looked to his arms, and rode quietly along toward the timber.

Five horsemen had come out of the timber, and were riding leisurely toward the scout, as though to meet him, and yet exhibiting toward him no hostile demonstrations.

They were Indians, in all their glory of war-paint and feathers, and one rode slightly in advance of the other four.

"The devil himself, as I live!" said Buffalo Bill.

Then a moment after he added:

"Old Black Face has noticed that the train has turned back, for he evidently had lookouts in the tree-tops, and he is coming to ask me, or rather Kiowa Carl, as he thinks, the reason."

"Well, the train was too far off for him to see anything going on of a suspicious nature."

It was now growing dark, and when Buffalo Bill drew within a couple of hundred yards of the Indians, he was confirmed in his opinion that Kiowa Carl had turned traitor to his own race, and that Black Face was his ally in devilry, for as yet no hostile sign was shown by the red-skins.

Upon getting within a few lengths of the Indians, Buffalo Bill, imitating, as nearly as possible, and he was a good mimic, the voice of Kiowa Carl, called out at random:

"Does the Black Face frown at his white brother, that he brings not the train into the timber?"

"The pale face spoke crooked to the Black Face, to bring him here with his warriors."

"No."

"Yes, for his white brother came two suns ago and told the Black Face to be here."

"He came with his warriors and he saw the white chief coming over the prairie, and far behind him the wheel-tepees of his people."

"Then the Black Face saw, and his warriors saw, that the pale-face turned back to the wheel-tepees, and then they went toward the rising sun, on the trail they had come, while my brother comes on alone."

"The Black Face talks of what his eyes have seen," said Buffalo Bill, speaking in the Sioux tongue perfectly.

"But he knows not what his brother, Kiowa Carl, has to say."

"The Black Face will listen," said the chief, evidently greatly disappointed at having seen the train turn back.

"Let the Black Face have his ears open then."

"His braves, in the tree-tops, may have seen a pale-face runner, on horseback, join the train?"

"The braves of the Black Face said so."

"Aha! I'll make this old wretch tell me all he knows," muttered Buffalo Bill, while aloud he said:

"That was a horse brave of the pale-face chief, sent to order the wheel-tepees back to the Platte, as many white soldiers are on the track of the Black Face."

The Indian chief, in spite of his stoicism, started and glanced nervously at his warriors, while Buffalo Bill continued:

"The brother of the Black Face heard all, and he told the chief of the wheel-tepees which trail to take, and where to camp, and sent word to the captain of the horse-braves that he would go on and find the Black Face and his warriors, and then come and tell them where to strike his village."

The old chief fairly shouted with rage at this bold assertion, failing to see that there was a pretended motive, and Buffalo Bill cried:

"Let the Black Face hear, for, by telling the horse-braves of the whites this crooked story, he could come on and meet his red brothers, let them know where and when to strike the wheel-tepees, then go back and tell the pale-face chief a false trail for his warriors to take, and lead them into an ambush which my brother here can have ready."

"Ugh!" said the Black Face, now seeing through the supposed ruse of his pretended ally.

"Ugh!" grunted the four warriors, delighted at the prospect of blood, booty and scalps before them.

"The Black Face has heard," said the chief, as though anxious to hear more and not willing to show curiosity to do so.

"I guess you have, you old villain, and if I don't fill that ugly head of yours full of lies, it will be because my tongue sticks to the truth too fast to pull it off," mentally observed Buffalo Bill, while aloud he continued:

"The Black Face knows the Lone Tree, toward the setting sun!"

"The Black Face has been there," was the pompous reply.

"Two suns from this the wheel-tepees will camp there."

"Ugh."

"Let the Black Face creep upon the camp by night, leaving their ponies far out on the prairie, and his braves can do their work."

"Ugh," and the grunt was one of satisfaction most intense.

"His brother will be there, and when the braves of the Black Face have many scalps at their belts, and their ponies are loaded with the booty of the pale-faces, I will lead them on to the spot where the white warriors can be met in battle and defeated."

"Ugh! my white brother is a great chief."

"Let him come to my camp," said the delighted savage.

"No, for I must be off on the trail to seek the white chief."

"The White Panther, the pale-face brother of the chief is in the camp and would see the Kiowa Carl."

Buffalo Bill fairly started at the name, for he had long heard of the renegade white, known as White Panther, whose crimes had forced him to seek refuge among the red-skins.

He knew him to be also a companion of Kiowa Carl, and did he meet him at once would his disguise be penetrated, and death would quickly follow, and death of the most awful torture that Indian cruelty could devise.

Remembering that Mr. Markham had told him Kiowa Carl had secretly met a white man on the prairie, he felt assured that White Panther, as the Indians called him, and Salt Lake Saul as he was known in the settlements, must be that individual, who had gone on ahead, when his pard became the guide of the train, for no other purpose than to get old Black Face as an ally.

He knew he had to be most cautious, not to betray ignorance, so asked, as a feeler:

"Why did not the White Panther come with my red brother, the Black Face, to meet me?"

"The Panther has ridden hard, and was tired and asleep."

"Ah! but he must have eyes like the stars now, for I want him to guide the wheel-tepees to the Lone Tree."

"The Black Face will tell him."

"It is well, and I will start on the back trail."

"Let the Panther have a swift pony and follow."

"It shall be as my white brother says," replied the old chief, and bidding the red-skins farewell, Buffalo Bill started upon his return, greatly rejoicing in his discovery, and the accomplishment of his ruse.

He had gone but a short distance when he called back to Black Face to bid the White Panther to hurry on after him, and there came back the answer:

"The Panther shall have my swiftest pony, and will soon be with my white brother."

"It will be a sad moment for him when he is, or I am mistaken," muttered Buffalo Bill, as he rode on his way, plotting mischief against the man on whose head a reward was offered as a renegade and red-handed murderer.

CHAPTER IX.

ENTRAPPING A PANTHER.

THE individual known as White Panther was sleeping as serenely beneath the shelter of a tree, when Black Face returned to the timber, as though the blood of scores of whites whom he had murdered did not rest upon his guilty soul.

He had ridden hard that day, and in fact for several days had had little rest, so he was glad to sink to repose in security, and dream of the booty he was to be a sharer in, when the Markham train was at the mercy of the red demons who were his allies.

He was surprised when Black Face awoke him to make known that he had seen Kiowa Carl coming, and had met him out upon the prairie, and told him of the train going to the right-about.

"Durn them sogers!" he said, savagely.

"They is allus pokin' round when they hain't wanted."

"But then, as it are, it are better, chief, fer ef we had tackled ther train ther sogers w'd hev been too hot on our trail ter save the booty, an' all we'd hev got w'd hev been sculps, which you Injuns prizes more'n we whites, unless we has a leetle revenge in ther biz."

All this was spoken in border English, which Black Face imperfectly understood, and could make no more appropriate reply to than that Kiowa Carl was a great chief, had done the Indians many good turns, and knew what was best, and wished the White Panther to follow him at once, and go as guide to the wheel-tepees.

"Durnation! more ridin' and my horse already played."

"The Panther shall have the pony of the Black Face," was the response of the chief, who knew that though his pony was a good animal, that of the renegade was a better one, though

then tired out, and that in the end he would gain by his generosity.

"I'll make the swap, chief, fer I has my eye on a horse I seen in the train, afore it pulled out o' Omaha."

"Git up yer pony an' I'll strike Kiowa's trail."

The pony soon had the saddle and trappings of the renegade upon him, and mounting the villain set off at a swinging lope, which threatened to soon overtake Buffalo Bill, did he not increase the pace at which he had ridden away.

An hour's gallop and he saw in the distance the dark forms of a horse and rider, and instantly he gave a shrill whistle.

"Ho, Saul, that you?" cried a voice, and the renegade replied:

"Yas, an' I has hed a lively gallop ter overtook yer."

"Is yer ridin' fer a prize, Kiowa?"

"Yes, I am."

"Waal, what is ther stakes?" and the renegade drew rein, as his pony got head and head with the gaunt black ridden by Buffalo Bill.

"The stakes is White Panther alias Salt Lake Saul, as you see."

The answer fell like a thunder-clap from a cloudless sky upon the startled renegade, while he felt a revolver-muzzle pressed hard against his heart.

Salt Lake Saul was a quick man with revolver and knife, and a hard one to surprise, as many had found out to their cost.

But he had been caught for once, and by one he deemed his devoted pard.

There must be some mistake, and he half-laughed forth:

"What in thunder does yer mean, Kiowa?"

"Just what I say," was the stern rejoinder.

"An' what did yer say?"

"That the stake I am now playing for is Salt Lake Saul, the renegade, and I have won it."

"Durnation! does yer think this are a place ter joke, pard?"

"Move one finger and you'll find this is no joke, but deadly earnest."

"What hev I did ter turn yer ag'in' me this way, Kiowa?"

"I am not Kiowa."

"Holy Rockies! then I are cotched!"

"Yes, the panther is entrapped at last! Hold! Keep those hands away from your pistols, or I pull trigger, and it's but an inch to your heart from my pistol-muzzle."

"Durned ef I a hain't right!"

"But who in chunder be yer that looks like Kiowa, an' yet hain't got his voice, now I observes?"

"Have you ever heard of Buffalo Bill?"

"Bitin' snakes o' Ireland! is yer thet terror?" almost howled the renegade.

"Yes, I am Buffalo Bill."

"Then ther dance is done, and ther fiddler's ter pay," was the almost resigned response.

"Yes, and Death's the fiddler."

"Don't doubt it, pard Buf'ler, an' I'll soon hev a harp o' a thousan' strings ter sing psalms o' glory on."

"Or a poker to stir up the fire below."

"Don't speak o' it, fer it makes me shiver ter think how hot it are, and—"

Quicker than a flash of lightning he had suddenly dropped his hand upon a revolver butt, and it was half out of his belt, when Buffalo Bill clutched it, and cried sternly:

"Hold on, sir, for I am your master."

"Yer takes my hand, pard; I pass," said the disappointed renegade, and at an order to raise his hands above his head he silently obeyed, while Buffalo Bill disarmed him.

"Now your claws are cut, we'll get along better together, and I want to be sociable, as I have some questions to ask you."

"Shout out fust how 'tis yer looks so like Kiowa as ter take me in, an' ther Black Face, too?"

"Oh, that is simply a little ruse I played to find out what I wanted to know."

"An' yer did?"

"Yes."

"I hopes it will do you no good."

"But it will, for I shall see you hang along with Kiowa Carl."

"Hes yer got him, too?"

"I have."

"So I sees, when I looks at thet hoss yer straddles."

"Waal, waal, we is both tuk in, and old Black Face made a durned fool of, too."

"You seem to feel better over the news."

"I does, fer misery loves comp'ny, an' I are miser'ble to a howlin' degree thet are painful."

"You'll soon be out of your misery."

"I'd rather be miser'ble, onderstandin' yer meanin' as I does."

"But tell me, Buf'ler, whar hev yer got Kiowa?"

"Safe."

"An' I are goin' thar, too?"

"Yes."

"You is a liar!"

The right hand, which had slipped into some mysterious pocket and quietly grasped a small

repeater, was suddenly thrust forward, right in the face of Buffalo Bill, and as the finger touched the trigger the flash and report came together.

But, quick as was the act, Buffalo Bill succeeded in striking up the arm of the renegade, and the bullet tore along the top of his head, inflicting a scalp wound only.

Though slightly stunned by the shock and momentarily blinded, Buffalo Bill drew trigger, ere a second shot came from the renegade, and the wail of agony and hatred that broke from his lips told that the bullet had hit him hard.

CHAPTER X. THE CAMP.

I WILL now return to the train, after the departure of Buffalo Bill upon his perilous mission, and which the reader has seen he accomplished in safety.

Riding by the side of Madge, he left the prisoner, black with rage, under the especial care of Seedy Sam, who was delighted at the honor, and warned Kiowa Carl that he would kill him without the slightest compunction, if he gave him the shadow of a cause.

"I sh'd hate ter hev ter make a hole in them garments o' mine, but I'd stan' ther expense of a bullet-hole ef yer give me ther slightest cause ter draw on yer," said Seedy Sam, like others who or a anything, believing his clothing which he had loaned to the prisoner quite too good for him, although a more tattered-demon suit would be hard to find out of a junk-shop.

In fact the teamster's dilapidated appearance generally had gained for him his name of Seedy Sam.

"And you think," said Madge, when her father had joined her and told her of Buffalo Bill's having assumed the rig of Kiowa Carl, "that he will dare venture into the camp of the savages, pretending to be the guide?"

"Yes, my daughter, for from all I have heard of that famous man, I know he will hesitate at no risk to carry out his ends."

"How different he is from what I had pictured him, when reading romances of his strange deeds upon the border,

"He seemed to me, as there pen-painted, a giant, and ferocious being, whose hands and clothing must be covered with the blood of his foes."

"But we find him an elegant gentleman, courtly as a Chesterfield, and as handsome as a picture."

"He is indeed a remarkable man, Madge, and I sincerely hope will come safely through all his dangers."

"It certainly is very noble of him to set aside his duties, which must be urgent, to get us out of the scrape into which that traitor guide led us."

"Oh, father! what if Buffalo Bill had not come on after us?" and Madge shuddered, while Mr. Markham answered:

"The thought of what would have followed, Madge, is terrible to contemplate."

And thus father and daughter talked on until at last the camping-ground was reached and the tent was spread, which was especially for the use of Madge and Miss Samantha Doolittle.

In getting things to rights, preparing supper, and making himself generally useful, Pepper, the youth, was invaluable, and won pronounced praise from Miss Samantha.

"Madge," she said, "I do be thinking that Providence was most kind to that boy, to bring him under the shelter of our guardian wings."

"Or to us, auntie,"—Madge always called Miss Doolittle auntie, though that lady had begged her to make it "cousin"—"for Pepper certainly has proven himself most useful in everything, and is really womanly in all he does for us."

"True, Madge, true, he almost seems to me like a woman, at times; but do you know you were sadly remiss to-day?"

"How so, auntie?"

"In your duty."

"What sin did I commit, and what duty omit, pray?"

"You did not introduce me to that very elegant gentleman, Mister Buffalo Bill."

"Why, auntie, I hardly met him myself, and I knew not who he was until Kiowa Carl spoke his name."

"Well, Madge, I don't know as I should, and I don't know but what I should have spoken to him without an introduction, under the circumstances, for I owed him our thanks for all he did."

"He did not seem to like thanks, auntie."

"True nobility, my dear; the truest kind, that avoids recognition for brave deeds done."

"If I were him, I don't know as I should, and I don't know but what I should do the same way; but—"

"Here is Pepper to announce supper," said Madge, glad to cut off the beginning of a few comments, which Miss Doolittle always made lengthy when she began with "But—"

The youth known as Pepper was a slender, gracefully formed young man, almost a boy in years, for he seemed hardly twenty, and his

face was one that few could gaze upon and fail to see that in it to admire and like.

He was dressed in a free and easy costume, wore beneath his sack-coat a belt of arms, and his hands and feet were very small and shapely.

His hair, contrary to the border custom, was cut short, and his slouch hat had the rim pulled down all around.

"Miss Madge, supper is served, and Aunt Phillis has made some of Miss Samantha's hock-cakes," he said, in a boyish voice, and with a mischievous twinkle of the eye.

"Oh, Pepper! why do you call me Miss Samantha, and never pronounce the last syllable?" cried the old maid.

"It's too much for me to tackle, miss, as I have a shortness of breath," replied the youth, and he led the way to the fire, where Mr. Markham was already seated at the table, upon which "Aunt Phillis," the negro woman, was placing a tempting meal.

Mr. Markham and the ladies then sat down to supper, while Pepper busied himself in aiding Coon to get things to rights for the night.

But there was one missing from the table, who each meal had sat with them, and that one was the guide.

In the goodness of her heart Madge herself arranged a tray with his supper, and carried it to him, to where he sat upon the trunk of a tree, securely bound.

"I have come with your supper, sir," she said, quietly.

His head was bent, and at her words he started, looked up, and the firelight showed that his face flushed, while he said, in his quiet way:

"You are very kind, Miss Markham; but one doomed to die cares little for food."

CHAPTER XI. BEFRIENDING A FOE.

"BUT you are not doomed to die," said Madge, struck by his manner and the pathos in his voice.

"Ah! you little know that inhuman wretch, Buffalo Bill."

"He certainly does not look the man you paint him."

"Looks are deceiving, Miss Markham, as you will find out when you know him better."

"It will take a great deal to make me feel that he is other than an honorable man, for if his face lies then where will we ever look for honor and virtue imprinted on the human countenance?"

"So I once thought, Miss Markham, and I loved Buffalo Bill as a brother."

"I had a happy home, and all about me to make life joyous; but, like the snake he is, he came into my homestead, and left only ruin, despair and sorrow behind him."

"I sought revenge upon him, and here is his mark."

He drew aside his hair as he spoke, revealing a hole in his ear, evidently made by a bullet passing through.

After a moment he resumed, and his voice quivered:

"He called that 'his mark;' but, oh! he had left far worse scars in my heart."

"I came to the prairies to hide my sorrows, and here he has dogged me, and, with his plausible story, see how I am, while he has gone free."

"Soon he will return and tell strange stories of me, saying he has verified all he said, and your father's train-men will swing me up like a dog to die."

"No, they will not do that; but a trial will be given you," said Madge, earnestly.

"There is no justice on this border, Miss Markham, excepting such as is administered from the muzzle of a revolver and the point of a knife."

"But my father will see that you do not suffer innocently."

"Miss Markham, your father is a just man; but the men who are now his teamsters are cowboys, and a wild set, who love turmoil rather than peace, and Buffalo Bill will soon set them upon me like a pack of hounds, while your father will be powerless to aid me."

"But surely he will not do this wrong?"

"He surely will, and worse, as he has done in the past."

"But remember the splendid name he has won along the border as the foe of evil-doers, and the bulwark that stands between the settler and the cruel red-skins."

"The stories of novelists, Miss Markham, I assure you."

"But I can do nothing, so will say no more."

He bowed his head and Madge was deeply impressed with all she had heard.

She believed Buffalo Bill honorable and noble, and the guide guilty; but still there might be a shadow of doubt to both beliefs, and he was entitled to the doubt until proven wicked.

"Answer me," she said with stern abruptness:

"Why did you leave the regular trail?"

"As I told your father, Miss Markham, to flank a band of red-skins."

"But Buffalo Bill said there were no Indians

on the regular trail, and there were many on the route we were going."

"It is but a question of veracity between us, Miss Markham, and when I am dead and beyond recall to earth, you will find that I was the one sinned against."

"If I could believe this, I would this instant set you free," she said, in her earnest, impulsive way.

His eyes flashed, and he drooped his head the more to hide his thoughts, which surged through his brain like a torrent.

After a while he seemed to have decided upon his course, and said in his low, really soft tones:

"Miss Markham, as a man who stands looking down into his own grave, you will forgive me for what I say to you."

"I say it, asking no mercy at your hands, but only to prove to you that I am innocent of the charge against me."

"Will you hear me?"

"Yes."

"And forgive me?"

"What have I to forgive?"

"That which I have to say to you."

"I will hear you."

"I will only say then, that when a man of my strong nature loves, he would risk life, all, for the one who has won that love, and face death a thousand times to shield her from harm."

"My love may have made me over-cautious, but loving you, as I confess I do, I did all in my power to shield you from harm, and would have gone hundreds of miles out of my way rather than have an Indian fire upon this train."

"I have only to say, Miss Markham, that thus loving you, I could not have willfully led you into danger."

Madge Markham fairly trembled at the words of the man.

She had seen that he liked to be with her, yet, even in her short life she had received so much of homage from men, which her beauty, wit and lovely character commanded, she had not noticed that he had felt for her more than friendly regard.

His confession of love, coming as it did from a man in his situation and deadly peril, fairly stunned her.

She felt pained, deeply so, for what could she say in return, not even liking him, in spite of her admiration for the manly qualities he had exhibited in their few weeks' acquaintance? for the daily marches of the train had not averaged many miles.

There was one thing this confession did, and that was just what Kiowa Carl had aimed at.

That was it caused her to doubt the guide's guilt, and to feel a germ of suspicion against Buffalo Bill, after all that she had heard against him from the lips of the prisoner.

Madge was impulsive, and her feelings frequently prompted her to act immediately, so she said, after a moment of silence:

"If you can be so base as to be deceiving me, may God forgive you."

"Ha! then there is in your heart a return of the affection I feel—"

The man's eager tones were checked by her quick and cold words:

"No! no! no! do not misunderstand me, sir, for I meant not to imply that I cared for you, for, on the contrary, I do not; but if you are so base as to have said you love me, merely to touch my sympathy for you, I repeat may God forgive you."

He seemed disappointed, and said in an injured tone:

"You are unkind to doubt me after such a confession."

"I will, acting upon that confession, believe you innocent, and if you pledge yourself to return within the month and prove yourself innocent of the charge against you, to my father, I will set you free."

He started, and answered:

"And if I so prove myself innocent, what may I expect from you?"

"Nothing more than the pleasure I feel in having saved an innocent man from the death, which, you say, will be visited upon you."

"And that is all?"

"All."

"No more?"

"You have heard me, sir, and I have nothing more to say."

She too, from her pocket, as she spoke, a pen-knife, and quickly severed the bonds that held him fast.

"Now you are free, and I advise you to lose no time in making your escape, which can easily be done now while the men are at supper."

"Good-by, sir, and if I do wrong, Heaven forgive me; if right, I will have my own reward."

She turned away as she spoke, and though he called to her, she did not stop, but continued on to her tent, while he, with a sinister, triumphant smile, glided away into the shadows of the timber, sprung upon the back of the first horse he came to, and rode off upon the prairie, the animal without bridle or saddle, and the rider without arms.

CHAPTER XII.

SEEDY SAM IN DANGER.

WHEN Seedy Sam went to make his prisoner secure for the night, by tying him the more firmly to a tree, and sleeping by his side, his yell of surprise alarmed the camp, and brought all to the spot, excepting Madge and Miss Doolittle.

The two ladies remained at their tent, the old maid chattering like a parrot with alarm, and longing over and over again for the coming of Mister Buffalo Bill.

"What is it, Pepper?" she asked, excitedly, as the lad came back from the scene, followed by Coon and Phillis.

"Satan's broke his chains, Miss Samantha," was the reply.

"You naughty boy, what do you mean now?" asked the elderly maiden.

"I tole yer, Missy Sum'tha, de boy do mean dat de priz'ner hev gotted loose, so he hab," said Phillis.

"Oh, catch me!" yelled Miss Samantha, staggering backward toward Pepper.

But Pepper stepped aside and Miss Doolittle had a fall that made her false teeth rattle and her "store curls" quiver.

"Lordy, chile, what fer yer let Missy Sum'tha take a tumble like dat?" cried Coon, springing forward and placing Miss Doolittle on her feet again, who said, faintly:

"Have I been in a faint long?"

"Not an instant, I assure you, Miss Doolittle, as I also promise you there is no cause for you to faint, for I set the prisoner free," said Madge, coldly.

"Madge, my child, what is this I hear?" cried Mr. Markham, just then approaching the tent.

"I mean, father, that Kiowa Carl pledged his word that the scout accused him of treachery through his hatred of him, and that to save a life that might have to suffer innocently, I set the guide free, and he is to come to your ranch within the month and prove that he was not guilty."

"Oh, Madge, I fear you have committed a great error, and I know not what to say," said Mr. Markham, wholly bewildered at the bold act of his daughter.

"Kiowa Carl will never prove his innocence, Miss Madge."

The remark came from Pepper, in low, earnest tones, wholly different from his usual light manner of speaking.

"Ah, how romantic of you, Miss Madge. I do wish that I—but, no, I don't know as I should, and I don't know but what I should have done the same, but—"

"Pepper, go and tell Seedy Sam to come here," said Mr. Markham, cutting Miss Doolittle off short.

In a moment the teamster appeared, followed by his comrades who were crowding around him.

One glance at the group, and Madge Markham realized how quickly was border justice and injustice dealt out upon that far-away prairie, for she saw around the neck of Seedy Sam a lariat, and that his arms were pinioned behind him.

Instantly she sprung forward and dragged the noose from his neck, and, with the same pen-knife which had set free Kiowa Carl, severed the lariat that bound his hands behind him.

"What does this mean?" she asked, sternly, while her eyes flashed fire, and her face, as seen by the firelight was flushed and angry.

"He sot ther priz'ner loose, miss, an' we were going ter string him up," said one.

"It is no such thing, for I set Kiowa Carl free, not wishin' to see a man die, who swore he was innocent," was the ringing response.

"Pards, yer hears her talk, an' I guesses yer takes a back seat now, while Seedy Sam shouts thankfulness ter this heur lady fer savin' him from bein' h'isted," and that worthy individual, who in ten minutes more would have been innocently hanged, stepped forward, doffed his hat, and bowed low before Madge, who answered:

"I am sorry my act should have so endangered your life, and also that your comrades are so ready to kill upon a mere suspicion of guilt."

"If any one must suffer, I am the one."

"An' I guesses ther pilgrim what says a word ter you, gits choked with a bullit," said Seedy Sam, picking up his belt of arms, which one of the crowd had dropped, and glowering around upon those who had so nearly ended his life.

But the teamsters were abashed at the mistake they had made and were only too glad to skulk away, threatening to get Seedy Sam drunk, as a way of asking his forgiveness for the error they had committed.

As to Mr. Markham, he knew not what to say or do, as Madge kissed him good-night, and silently entered her tent, whither Miss Samantha quickly followed, leaving the father seated by the fire brooding over what had occurred, and wondering what motive could have prompted his daughter to do as she had done.

"Good God! can she love him?" he groaned aloud as the thought flashed through his mind.

CHAPTER XIII.

GUILTY.

THE members of the train went to their blanket-beds, that night in camp, with something to ponder over, from Seedy Sam, who thought of his escape, and his comrades, who could not decide upon the motive of Madge in releasing the prisoner, down to her father, who feared he had solved that motive, and Coon and Phillis, who talked it over until they dropped asleep.

The following morning, as the savory smell of broiling antelope steaks was wafted through the timber, the teamster acting as sentinel called out that a horseman was in sight.

Soon after he cried:

"Thar is two of 'em."

The excitement in the camp at once became great, for they knew not what danger they had to confront.

But it was but a short time before Madge, looking through her glass, cried:

"It is the guide coming back, and mounted upon his own horse, while he leads another animal, upon the back of which is a heavy load, apparently."

Her father took the glass and said, after glancing through it:

"That is not the guide, Kiowa Carl, my daughter, but Buffalo Bill in his clothing."

"Oh, yes, I had forgotten that he disguised himself to look like the guide, father."

"What, is it that elegant gentleman, Mister Buffalo Bill?" cried Miss Doolittle, primping up her curls.

"It certainly is, Miss Samantha," answered Mr. Markham.

"Do tell! I am so glad, and I hope, Madge, you will not be so remiss as to fail to present him to me."

"I will not forget it, auntie; but, father, do you observe anything strange about the burden the led horse bears?"

Mr. Markham looked attentively through his glass for full a moment, and answered:

"Yes, Madge."

"Well, sir?"

"It is a human being."

"So I thought."

"Laws sakes! and the poor critter is tied to the horse?"

"Yes, Miss Samantha, and he is either badly wounded, or—"

"Dead," added Madge, as her father paused.

All who had heard the conversation now gazed with interest upon the coming horseman, and as he drew nearer they could distinctly see that the led horse carried a human form, yet whether dead or alive it was hard to tell.

Nearer and nearer the two horses came, until presently Buffalo Bill drew rein near the tent, and politely raised his hat to the ladies, while Mr. Markham said:

"Glad to see you back, scout, and I hope you bring us good news."

"I bring you a wounded prisoner, sir, the companion in guilt of Kiowa Carl," and Buffalo Bill threw aside the false beard he wore, sprang to the ground and approached the led horse, which was a spotted Indian pony.

Upon the back of the pony Buffalo Bill had arranged blankets so as to form a kind of resting place for the wounded man, whose face was white and pinched, as with the greatest anguish.

His feet and arms had then been so bound as to hold him in position, and though he had suffered fearfully at every step of his horse, he had borne up bravely through the long night's ride.

The teamsters and all the camp had now gathered around, and Buffalo Bill said:

"Make me up a bed for him as soon as possible."

This was quickly done, and, aided by Seedy Sam, the scout raised the wounded man from the back of the pony.

"Gently, pard Bill, fer yer bullit hunted deep, an' I hain't no child ter groan at a trifle," he said, as his face became livid, when Buffalo Bill laid him upon the hastily-constructed couch.

"He is most severely wounded, I see," said Mr. Markham, in a sympathetic tone.

"He has his mortal wound, sir," was the calm reply.

"Can he not live?"

The question came timidly from Madge.

"Not an hour longer, miss."

"Introduce me, Madge, for I wish to speak to the famous scout and ask him a few questions," said Miss Doolittle, driving her sharp elbow into the side of the maiden.

But Madge was gazing sorrowfully upon the dying man, and seeing that an introduction was not to be had just then, Miss Doolittle made a low courtesy, gave a smirk, and said:

"Pardon my speaking to you, great scout, without a formal presentation, and let the circumstances under which we meet be my excuse for my boldness, for I don't know as I should, and I don't know but what I should; but—"

Here she gave the usual pause, and Mr. Markham coughed, Madge turned away, and Coon was heard to say in a low tone:

"Golly, but she am a talker!"

"But," repeated Miss Doolittle, in a louder tone, "will you kindly inform me, sir, if that poor suffering mortal man was slain by the aborigines?"

"Don't toot yer horn too lively, old gal, fer I hain't dead yet," came from the wounded man, and in spite of himself Buffalo Bill smiled; but checking the laughter that was ready to burst from his lips, he said:

"No, miss, this man was wounded by myself."

"You shot him?" and Miss Doolittle grew faint.

"I did, madam."

"He shouts truth, old gal, and yer may set him down as havin' kilt me, fer I got it hear; but I don't blame him, fer ef he hadn't been quicker then I were, he'd 'a' been out on ther pararer now."

All looked at the wounded man, and then at Buffalo Bill, who stood calmly gazing down upon the one whom he had wounded unto death.

"Can nothing be done for him, sir?" asked Madge.

"Nothing, miss."

"Who is he, sir?"

The question came from Mr. Markham, and in response Buffalo Bill said:

"He is— But ask him, sir."

The wounded man heard the query and reply, and answered for himself:

"Has yer ever heerd o' Salt Lake Saul, pard?"

All started, excepting Mr. Markham and the ladies, while the former rejoined:

"I must confess I have not."

"Perhaps ef I sling my t'other handle at yer, yer'll know it."

"Has yer heerd o' ther White Panther?"

"A renegade said to be an ally of the Indians?"

"Yas."

"And do you claim to be that monster, of whom so much that is wicked has been said?" asked Mr. Markham, in a tone of horror, while Madge shrunk back with a shudder, for she, too, had heard of the White Panther.

"No more dodgin' ther truth, pard, fer Buf-ler thar knows me."

"I are Salt Lake Saul, ther White Panther," and the dying man cast his eyes around the group to see the effect of his words.

All remained silent, and he continued, while his voice each moment grew weaker:

"I am thet pilgrim; what Buf'ler hes left o' me, an' as I axed him ter fetch me ter camp ter see my old pard, Kiowa Carl, afore I died, he patched up this hole in my side, and here I are, so trot out Kiowa, or I'll leave ther life-trail afore he sees me."

"He wishes to see the prisoner, Kiowa Carl, alone for a few minutes, sir, and I see no reason why we should refuse the request of a dying man," said Buffalo Bill, as all looked at each other, and no one spoke in reply to the request of Salt Lake Saul.

Mr. Markham's face flushed, and he looked worried; but before he could reply, Madge stepped forward and said, in her clear, distinct tones:

"The guide, Kiowa Carl, is no longer in camp, sir, for I released him last night."

Buffalo Bill was taken aback, it was evident, and he arched his finely-penciled brows and looked at the maiden for an explanation, while the dying man shouted forth:

"Are this a leetle game ter keep me from seein' Kiowa?"

"I assure you, no."

"Kiowa Carl swore to me that he was innocent of the charge this gentleman made against him, and, to save him from death, which he said would be his fate, I set him free."

"My dear young lady, you have made the saddest mistake of your life, for, upon your own track you have loosened a bloodhound that knows no mercy to man or woman."

Buffalo Bill spoke the words in an impressive manner that caused every particle of blood in the face of Madge Markham to recede in a torrent upon her heart, and for a moment she felt as though she would faint.

But recovering herself quickly, by a great effort, she said in a low tone:

"I believed him innocent from all he said to me."

"This man, if he will, can tell you if he is guilty, or not."

"Will you speak, Salt Lake Saul?"

All waited breathlessly for the answer of the dying man.

He professed to be the friend of Kiowa Carl, and he had long been the pronounced foe of Buffalo Bill.

Would his hatred of the scout cause him to protect Kiowa Carl with his last breath?

If he said the guide was innocent, then Madge would feel that he had spoken the truth in speaking against Buffalo Bill.

She wished to feel that she had not done wrong, and yet she found it hard to believe that such a man as Buffalo Bill's face showed him to be, could be playing a deep game against the guide.

Buffalo Bill seemed the most unconcerned of

all present, and as Salt Lake Saul hesitated, he asked:

"Will you answer, Salt Lake Saul, as to the guilt of Kiowa Carl?"

"What does yer wish ter know?"

"Is he not, like yourself, a renegade?"

"It are safer fer him ter live among Infjuns than white folks, an' thar are settlements he don't go in, onless he are disguised."

"Is that sufficient, miss?" and the scout turned to Madge, who, without glancing at him addressed Salt Lake Saul:

"Will you allow me a few questions, sir?"

"Yas, ef I hes time ter answer 'em; but wimmens is awful an' ungodly cur'us, an' maybe I mout die afore I kin answer 'em all."

In spite of herself Madge smiled, but asked:

"Was it the intention of our guide to lead us into the power of the Indians?"

"It were."

Madge started, and again asked:

"He then was their ally?"

"Fact, fer I were his pard, an' he were ter take you as his prize, an' me an' Black Face an' his bucks were ter hev ther booty."

"Oh! what have I not done!" cried poor Madge, and turning to Buffalo Bill she said pleadingly:

"I humbly ask you to forgive me, sir."

"I have nothing to forgive, Miss Markham, for myself, as it is yourself and those of the train that will be the sufferers," and Buffalo Bill bent over the dying man, and said kindly:

"Is there nothing I can do for you, pard, for I will gladly execute any request you have to make?"

Salt Lake Saul's manner at once changed, and a bright light seemed to come over his face, while he dropped at once the border slang, and said in a full voice:

"Buffalo Bill, you are a true mar. and I will trust you."

"I have long been a villain, and from bad to worse have I gone until I die now a renegade, a thief and a murderer."

"Could man be worse?"

"Don't speak of that now," said Buffalo Bill, in the same gentle, almost womanly softness of manner that showed the great scout in a new phase, by no means calculated to lessen him in the esteem of those who saw and heard him.

"You gave me my death-wound, Buffalo Bill, and I thank you for it, for you have saved me from the gallows, and I will prove my forgiveness by leaving to you a duty to perform."

"Around my waist, when I am dead, you will find a leather belt, in which are some valuable papers and a little money."

"A confession there from me will tell who I am, and what you are to do with the papers."

"Will you do this for me?"

"I will."

"Then I am content. Give me your hand, even if yours is honest and mine is crime-stained."

Buffalo Bill grasped the hand of the dying renegade, and kneeling by him thus remained.

The eyes of Salt Lake Saul closed, a smile even came upon his face, and soon the grip on the scout's hand relaxed and he was dead.

CHAPTER XIV.

BUFFALO BILL'S LITTLE GAME.

It was not long, after Salt Lake Saul died, before Buffalo Bill transferred the leather belt, unexamined by him, to his own waist, and told Mr. Markham that it was necessary for him to be at once on the march.

A grave was hastily dug, the body of the renegade placed therein, and the train pulled out for the Platte trail once more, Buffalo Bill again in his own clothing, and mounted upon his milk-white steed, while Madge rode Kiowa Carl's black, as the treacherous guide had, in making his escape that night, very quietly stolen the horse of the one who had set him free in return for her kindness, for he well knew the speed and bottom of the animal.

Having set Mr. Markham on the trail, with full directions what to do and where to camp, Buffalo Bill waved farewell to the ladies—a salute Miss Doolittle took to be a kiss of the hand to her, and returned it vigorously from her finger-tips—and started off across the prairie at a swinging gallop.

The noble animal seemed almost tireless, and the rest he had had while with the train seemed to make him feel perfectly fresh, so that mile after mile was thrown behind him with wonderful rapidity.

It was a long and hard ride, back to Fort Kearney, but the noble white horse was fully equal to it, and shortly after nightfall the light of the fort came in sight.

"Halt! who comes?"

The challenge of the sentinel rung out clear and stern, and Buffalo Bill drew rein while he answered:

"Scout with important news for the commandant."

"Dismount, advance, and give the countersign," returned the sentry.

"I have no countersign, so call the corporal of the guard and have me taken to the colonel, for I have no time to lose," answered the scout

impatiently, muttering to himself, as the soldier obeyed:

"Military discipline and red tape are well enough at times but not when a fellow is in a hurry."

It was some moments before Buffalo Bill was ushered into the presence of the commandant of Fort Kearney, who gave him a hearty welcome.

"Well, Cody, you don't mean to say that even *yourself* have ridden to Omaha and back since you left here going east?"

"No, colonel."

"Indians ran you back to the shelter of the fort, eh?"

"Not exactly, sir, and yet they are the cause of my coming."

"Indeed! I knew of none being along the trail east of here."

"Nor are there any, sir, immediately upon the trail; but I discovered a train trail, going up the north fork of the Loup, and knowing that it would lead directly into old Black Face's country, and seeing how small was the force, I took the liberty of disobeying orders, as I knew the contents of the dispatches, and that a few days' delay would do no great harm, and I followed on."

"You take big chances in disobeying orders, Cody, but I feel you deemed it of greater importance than to press on," said the colonel.

"Had I not, sir, I would have gone on."

"But I overtook the train, and discovered it to belong to a Mr. Mabrey Markham, who, with his daughter and another lady, his servants and cowboys, the latter acting as teamsters, was going to the Waller ranch, on the Platte, which he has lately purchased."

"I knew that Waller had been in correspondence regarding its sale."

"And Mr. Markham bought it, fitted out his train fully, in Omaha, and employed as a guide none other than Kiowa Carl."

"Ha! that devilish renegade and road-agent?"

"None other, sir, and he had a pard, Salt Lake Saul—"

"Another precious scoundrel."

"Yes, sir, during his lifetime," was the significant reply.

"You hint that he is dead?"

"He is."

"What was the nature of his illness?" and the colonel smiled.

"I killed him, sir."

"I expected that much, Cody, for you generally distribute your bullets when and where they are most needed."

"But there is a cool ten thousand offered for his head, dead or alive."

"You are in luck."

"I don't care for blood-money, colonel; but, as I was telling you, Salt Lake Saul had gone on ahead of Kiowa Carl and the train, to post old Black Face, who was to be in ambush at a certain timber motte."

"A rare plot of devilry."

"Which I am glad to say I thwarted, for, upon coming up with the train, I found Kiowa Carl had gone on ahead to prepare camp, he said, and I told Mr. Markham he was being led into a trap, got him to set one for the guide, and he came back and fell into it."

"Killed him, too, Bill?"

"No, sir."

"What a pity."

"I only wish I had, sir; but I only took his rig, and starting the train on the back trail, with him a prisoner, made up as Kiowa Carl, so as to fool Black Face, and went on to the timber where he lay in ambush with just fifty braves, I afterward found out."

"You were foolhardy, Cody."

"Oh, no, colonel, only a little risky; but I met the old red-skin, played Kiowa Carl on him, and fooled him well, and discovering that Salt Lake Saul was back in the timber, told Black Face to send him on after me, made up a tough yarn, and put back after the train."

"Salt Lake Saul followed me, mistook me for Kiowa Carl, his pard, discovered his mistake when I had the drop on him, but showed his panther claws, and I shot him."

"But I did not kill him then, but carried the plucky fellow on to the camping-ground of the train, and though he suffered untold agony he did not utter a groan."

"To my horror I found that Kiowa Carl had escaped, and, after burying Salt Lake Saul, who died an hour after reaching camp, I put the train on the right trail and came on here."

"You have done well, Cody; but why did you not go on to Omaha with the dispatches, and make this known upon your return?"

Buffalo Bill smiled, and answered:

"Because, colonel, my little game is not yet played out to the winning point."

"There is something else to tell, then?"

"No, sir, but to do."

"How mean you?"

"I made an appointment with old Black Face."

"Ah!"

"I told him, in my then character of his renegade ally, Kiowa Carl, that the train was to be at Lone Tree at a certain time, and to there creep upon it and attack it, while a squadron

of troopers were then moving upon him, supposing him to be elsewhere than where he then was."

"I see."

"The Lone Tree, as you know, is a rise in the prairie, where there is a good stream of water, a thicket of cottonwoods, and that one large tree."

"Yes, I have camped there."

"The grass is deep surrounding it, and the Indians can readily creep up on the camp and surprise it."

"True."

"Well, sir, I thought it would be a good idea to start out a couple of ambulances, a few wagons and several mounted men, and send them at once to the Lone Tree."

"To be surprised by the red-skins?"

"No, sir."

"What then?"

"To surprise the red-skins."

"I confess I am on a blind trail, Cody."

"The wagons and ambulances, sir, can be full of soldiers, and the horses can be those belonging to the troop."

"When they go into camp the horses can all be saddled and ready for mounting, the soldiers all lying in ambush, and when Black Face and his braves rush on the encampment, expecting to surprise a train with a few women and half a score of men, they can be met by half a hundred cavalymen."

"Cody, you are a trump," cried the enthusiastic colonel.

"Then play me at the game with old Black Face, and from there I will go on to Omaha with my dispatches, and only be about three days late, for to-morrow night is the time I appointed with the chief."

"But may not Kiowa Carl, who you say escaped from the train, have reached Black Face and thus let the cat out of the bag?"

"No, sir, for I followed his trail, and it led southward, and besides, as I started Black Face away from his ambush in the timber, and have ridden hard myself, Kiowa Carl cannot reach the red skins before they make their attack."

"Well, Cody, this is a glorious plan of yours, and I will send Captain Burr with you within the hour."

"We must start soon as possible, sir."

"You shall, for you wish to strike the trail Markham's train would be on, so as to deceive the red-skins should they be on the watch."

"But may not the Markham train come along, too?"

"No, sir, for I told Mr. Markham my plan, and directed him how to proceed, and where to camp."

The colonel touched a bell, an orderly appeared, and he was sent after Captain Dangerfield Burr, a handsome, dashing young cavalry officer, who readily entered into the plot, and used such dispatch in getting off that the sham settlers' train pulled out of Kearney in one hour after the arrival of Buffalo Bill in the fort.

CHAPTER XV.

BLACK FACE ON THE TRAIL.

SEATED upon his horse, gazing from a distant point, and concealed in a clump of cottonwoods, an Indian warrior was watching a small wagon-train filing across the prairie.

His eyes sparkled as he observed its course, and instinctively he dropped his hand upon his sculping-knife, as though in anticipation of the red deeds to be done, when darkness settled down upon the face of the earth.

Toward a rise in the prairie, where was one large tree, and numerous small ones, looking like a giant and his children, the train held its way, and within its shelter came to a halt, just as the sun touched the western horizon of the plain.

The Indian lookout still continued to gaze upon the glimmering white tilts of the wagon, lighted up by the last rays of the setting sun, and remained like a statue of bronze, his eyes riveted upon the scene, until he saw the rosy hue of camp fires cast their radiance out from the thicket.

Then, wheeling his pony he urged him to full speed, and for a few miles seemed to fly over the darkening prairie.

After a ride of half an hour he came upon a winding stream, the banks of which were fringed with cottonwoods, and down this he turned until he rode into a dense timber grove, where were visible, like shadowy specters, the forms of half a dozen horses and their riders.

"What has Good Eye to say?" asked a deep voice, as the Indian lookout sprang from his panting pony.

"The wheel-tepees have camped in the shadow of the Lone Tree," was the calm reply, although from the manner in which the savage had ridden, it would have been more natural had he blurted out excitedly the information he bore.

A satisfied grunt was uttered by the first speaker, and echoed by a score of others, and then came the question:

"How many wheel-tepees?"

The Indian courier indicated silently the number by holding up as many fingers as there were wagons.

"The pale-face spoke with a straight tongue.
"Let my braves mount their ponies and be ready."

It was the same one who had before spoken who gave the command, and as he rode out of the shadow of the timber upon the open prairie, the lingering light in the west revealed that it was Black Face, the Sioux chief.

As though he knew well the spot he held his way directly toward the Lone Tree, as the place was called where the Indian courier had seen the train go into camp.

A ride at a slow walk brought the mounted band to the place where the lookout had sat on his horse, gazing upon the train, and here a halt was made.

Dismounting, Black Face securely tied his pony, and then looked to his arms, his example being followed by the others of the band.

"Let Deer Foot and Eagle go forward and see if the pale-faces are asleep."

"We will wait their coming at the trail crossing."

The two braves, in obedience to the command of their chief, sprung away on foot and disappeared soon after in the darkness, while Black Face and his braves, also leaving their ponies behind them, under one guard, set off to follow them.

They had been gone but a short while, when the thud of hoofs on the prairie attracted the attention of the Indian sentinel over the ponies.

Attentively he listened, and soon discovered that the sound grew more and more distinct, and that whoever it was his course lay toward the timber where the ponies were concealed.

There was but one horse, he knew from the sound, and gliding to the edge of the timber toward which he was approaching, the warrior unslung his rifle and waited with a courage and calmness that it would be well for our soldiers to possess in times of danger when nerve is most needed.

CHAPTER XVI.

AN UNHEEDED WARNING.

GLANCING out over the prairie, in the direction from whence came the sound, the Indian guard's keen eyes soon caught sight of the form of a steed and rider approaching in the darkness.

The animal was keeping up the same steady gallop, and the rider did not seem to dread danger, from the manner in which he came on.

Presently, when within good gunshot range of the timber, he came to a halt, and stood for an instant, evidently searching the length of the motte, as though to penetrate its dark depths and discover what awaited him there.

Then upon the air arose the sharp bark of the coyote.

It seemed to make no impression upon the red-skin guard, who remained as motionless as a stone.

Now came the long-drawn-out howl of the wolf, and still the Indian did not move, although it was evident that the strange horseman was giving signals by his imitations of wild beasts.

A moment of silence followed, and clear and ringing, the notes of a night-bird were heard.

Then the Indian guard moved, his hands went to his lips, and the last signal was answered by the sharp bark of a coyote, which would have fooled an animal of that species itself.

Instantly the horseman came forward toward the timber, yet at a slow walk, and again halted when in easy pistol range, and called out, in the Indian tongue:

"Min-na wash-te!"

"Wash-te," came the response from the Indian, and the horseman rode up to the timber.

"Kiowa Carl!" cried the Indian, recognizing the horseman.

"My red brother speaks true, and I have come hard on the trail of the Black Face," was the answer of the rider, as he sprung to the ground, to give rest to his tired horse, whose drooping head showed that he had been pressed hard.

"The chief is on the red trail, as my white brother told him," answered the Indian.

"The Black Face is not here, then?"

"No."

"Where is he?"

"The Bear Claw has spoken."

"His ponies are here?" and Kiowa Carl glanced around him at the ponies hitched in the timber.

"The Bear Claw is their guard while the Black Face and his warriors have gone on the trail."

"But what trail, Bear Claw?" asked Kiowa Carl, evidently at a loss to understand the Indian.

"The trail of the wheel-tepees."

"Is there a train near?"

"Did not the Kiowa tell the Black Face that the wheel-tepees would camp at the Lone Tree, and that he must there creep upon them as a snake in the darkness?"

"Red-skin, you are badly off, for I told the Black Face no such thing."

*Equivalent to "How do you do?"

"The pale-face talks crooked, now.
"Let him follow the trail of the Black Face.
"He will find him upon the prairie toward the Lone Tree."

"I'll go at once," and Kiowa Carl, leaving his horse in the timber, the same splendid animal which he had stolen from Madge Markham, set out at a swinging trot upon the prairie.

He had gone about a mile when he suddenly stumbled over something in the deep grass, fell, and before he could resist was bound hand and foot.

"Is this the way for my red brothers to treat me?" he asked, in an injured tone, recognizing the braves of Black Face.

The Indians gave a grunt of surprise, cut his bonds at once and sent for Black Face.

"The Black Face welcomes his white brother."

"Has he just come from the pale-face camp?" said the chief, in his dignified way, for an Indian shows dignity, even in cutting a throat.

"My brother's eyes are blind, his ears are not right, and his feet follow the wrong trail," said Kiowa Carl, impressively.

"It is the trail that my white brother told me to follow."

"Not so, chief, for I have been a prisoner, and the timber where I expected you to ambush the train, and sent you word by the White Panther, is far from here."

"Did not the White Panther see the Black Face?"

"Yes, and told him all that the Kiowa had said; but does the Kiowa trifle with the Sioux?"

"No, it was all as I told the Panther to make known to you; but Buffalo Bill, the pale-face Pa-e-has-ka"—here a general grunt was given, and there was a hand dropped upon every knife-hilt—"came to the train, told the chief I was the ally of my red brothers, and I was seized and bound."

"But a pale-face maiden, one who is yet to be my squaw, set me free, and I have come on the trail of Black Face, to tell him where to strike the wheel-tepees."

The Indians, from the chief down, looked at each other in utter amazement, while Black Face said sternly:

"The Kiowa's tongue is crooked to talk so to the Sioux. They have eyes, they have ears, and are not smitten by the Great Spirit here," and he placed his hand upon his head, as a means of indicating that he was no fool.

"The Kiowa speaks true, and again tells the Black Face that the train is far from here."

"The Kiowa is like a snake, for he would strike his red brother, when he knows the wheel-tepees are there," and he pointed toward the Lone Tree encampment.

"That is not the camp of my people," firmly said Kiowa Carl.

"The Kiowa tells lies," was the savage rejoinder, and the acquiescing grunt of the braves proved that they thought so too.

Kiowa Carl dropped his hand upon his pistol, but realizing how unequal would be a combat, he said indifferently:

"There may be a camp there, and there is, for I see the fires; but it is not the camp of my people."

"Did not the Kiowa tell me they would be here?"

"No."

"Did he not tell me to come here with my braves and creep upon the wheel-tepees in the darkness?"

"No."

"Does the Kiowa say he did not come to my camp and tell me this?" and it was evident that Black Face was waxing wroth.

"I do say so, for I have not been in the camp of the Black Face, or near it, for months."

"I sent White Panther to you, to tell you what to do; but as I was taken prisoner I could not follow out my plan, and having escaped now I come to the Black Face to lead him upon the train of my people."

"Does the Kiowa think the Black Face and his braves are blind, and have no ears, that he tells them he came not to their camp two moons ago?"

"I did not. I only wish I could have done so."

"Yet he talked with the Black Face, and then returned to his people, and the White Panther went with him, and the Black Face is here to follow his words."

"Look here, chief, when was this?" suddenly asked Kiowa Carl, as the truth now flashed upon him.

"Two moons ago."

"By the Rockies! it was Buffalo Bill!"

"The great white chief hides not his face under hair," and Black Face referred to the beard of Kiowa Carl, who answered quickly:

"Yes, for he disguised himself to look like the Kiowa—put on his face a false beard."

"He has played with the eyes, and poured lies into the ears of the Black Face and his braves."

"The great Pa-e-has-ka has set you upon a wrong trail, chief, and laid a trap into which you are walking, for yonder train is not that of

*Pa-e-has-ka—Long Hair. One of the Indian names by which Buffalo Bill is known.

my people, for I left it far across the prairies toward the setting sun."

"And the White Panther?"

"I have not seen him."

"The Kiowa has a deep heart, and he is throwing lies in the ears of the Black Face."

"I am not, chief."

"The Black Face does not trust him."

"All right, you infernally stubborn red-skin! Go your own way and attack yonder train, and if you don't catch a Tartar, whose name is Buffalo Bill, you can set me down as the champion liar of the border, niggers, Chinese and red-skins included."

Black Face did not master all this; but he felt certain he was being deceived.

He had, as he believed, talked with Kiowa Carl face to face, and now felt that he had some secret motive for not wishing him to attack the train, and desired to fool him.

"The Black Face is no fool," he said, savagely.

"You'll find that you are, if you rush against that train, for I am sure that is some trick of that devil, Buffalo Bill."

"Let my warriors bind the Kiowa, and soon the Black Face will show him how crooked is his tongue."

"All right, chief! I'd rather be bound than go to fight yonder train," was the indifferent response of the man, who having seen that his warning was unheeded, seemed wholly satisfied to let the Indians find out the truth of what he had told them in their own way, and he laughed at the surprise he felt they would receive, as he was assured that Buffalo Bill had laid a trap into which they were going to fall with the greatest of ease.

CHAPTER XVII.

A SURPRISE.

WITHOUT the slightest resistance Kiowa Carl submitted to being bound, and was then laid upon the prairie, with the quiet remark from Black Face:

"When the pale-faces' scalps hang at the belts of my braves, and we come back for our ponies, the Black Face will return for the Kiowa."

"You don't mean to leave me here all alone, chief?" asked Kiowa, with quick alarm.

The chief nodded.

"Leave a brave with me."

"The knots of the bonds are tied."

"Still I might escape."

"The Black Face will risk it."

"Chief, again I warn you not to attack that camp."

"It looks as though I had deceived you, but I have told you only the truth, as you will soon find out."

"Let one of your braves stay with me to set me free, when it is proven my words are true."

"No," and as the chief uttered the word, the two warrior spies, whom he had sent on ahead to reconnoiter, came up to him.

"What have my braves seen?" he asked.

"All the pale-faces are asleep, and they keep no guard."

"Ugh! Now my pale-face brother with the crooked tongue hears."

"Yes, and you'll hear more than you want to soon," muttered Kiowa Carl.

Leaving the renegade where he had been tied, Black Face called his warriors around him, and as silent as specters they moved away in the darkness and disappeared.

For a quarter of a mile they glided rather than walked along, and then Black Face called a halt and gave a few orders in a low tone, which were passed along the line of grim savages.

Then, down upon their faces they fell, and, like magic disappeared from sight.

In the shelter of the few small trees surrounding the huge cottonwood, were visible four smoldering camp-fires that had been deserted for the night, and the camp seemed buried in deepest repose.

As the warriors, crawling like snakes through the grass, came nearer, their keen eyes detected on each side of the encampment what appeared to be a sentinel, leaning against a small tree, and their arrows were set to their bows, and soon each form had half a dozen shafts sent into it.

Without a groan from either they sunk upon the prairie, and then, leaping to their feet, with wild yells that were enough to strike terror to the stoutest heart, Black Face and his warriors rushed upon the camp.

The chief himself, ever foremost in the fight, bent above the form of one of the guards, to tear off the scalp, when a cry of surprise broke from his lips, as he found, not a human being, but a suit of clothes and that stuffed with prairie grass!

But ere he had time to ponder upon this strange circumstance, out from behind the circle of wagons poured a perfect stream of fire, and down in their tracks fell a score of red-men, dead and dying, while cheer after cheer of the soldiers broke upon the air, and spread dismay among the red ranks.

Black Face had just time to remember the warning given him by Kiowa Carl, and to realize that the renegade's tongue "had not been

crooked" in that instance, when he saw rushing upon him a platoon of soldiers with carbines and sabers, and quickly and loudly he called to his braves to rally around him.

They obeyed promptly, and met the attack bravely, although taken wholly by surprise; but when, out of the thicket where the train horses were concealed there dashed a score of cavalymen, with Buffalo Bill at their head, the savages gave one yell of terror, fired a volley at random, and bounded away over the prairie like a herd of deer.

With triumphant yells the cavalry followed them, shooting them down here and there, and causing them, as the only means of safety, to scatter singly and in pairs, and thus continue their mad flight, or hide in the long prairie grass.

As he bounded along, with a soldier in hot pursuit, Black Face had an opportunity of realizing how thoroughly he had been whipped, and to mourn over the loss of two-thirds, if not all of his warriors, for he had seen that it would be a miracle almost if himself or any one of the band escaped.

As he ran along like a deer, holding his own pretty well against the horse of his pursuer, he heard a cry and in the Sioux tongue. It was:

"Let my red brother free me from my bonds, that I may escape."

He recognized the voice, and saw indistinctly, seated upon the ground, half-hidden in the prairie grass, the form of Kiowa Carl.

Though he knew well that he had told the truth, and understood what a terror Kiowa Carl was in battle, he dared not then hesitate an instant to free him, while the thought came into his mind to free himself at the cost of the renegade's life.

Instantly he changed his course, and ran near the bound prisoner, to bring the pursuer upon him while following his trail, and, as he dashed by said:

"Let the Kiowa call upon his own people to set him free."

The next instant he had gone by like the wind.

But Kiowa Carl at once understood the dodge of the wily Indian, and hearing the trooper coming, threw himself over and over again in summersets, until he had gone many feet from where he had been lying.

Then he came to a halt, and wormed himself along in the grass until he was almost wholly concealed from view.

Just at that moment the cavalryman, in hot pursuit of Black Face, whose form he could indistinctly see in the distance, dashed by, and not twenty feet away from where Kiowa Carl was concealed.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MISPLACED CONFIDENCE.

FOR some moments after the passing of the trooper, Kiowa Carl lay motionless, as though he feared the coming by of others.

But as he heard no sound near, and the shouts of soldiers, and the tramping of horses far off, with an occasional shot, a cheer, or a death-yell, he rose again to a sitting posture.

To free himself he had found to be impossible, for Black Face had seen well to that.

His hands were bound behind his back, and a thong had connected them with his feet, which were also secured, so that he could not even stand upright.

Raising himself to a sitting posture, he gazed around over the prairie, and could see dark forms of horsemen flitting here and there.

"They are pursuing some of the red skins toward the timber where they left their horses; but few can escape, I'll warrant," he muttered.

Toward the Lone Tree, he saw that the campfires had been rekindled, and numerous forms were seen passing to and fro in the light of them, showing that the soldiers had been in considerable force.

"Well, I know this is a trick of Buffalo Bill, for he is up to just such plots, and he has bit old Black Face and his warriors hard, even if any of them get away, which looks doubtful.

"Well, if Satan takes care of me, and I don't see why he should desert me now, I'll take good care to make all the capital I can out of this, and they'll trust me, too, well remembering my warning, and how it was treated.

"But how to get out of the trouble myself, is the question."

That indeed seemed the question, and yet, bound hand and foot as he was, with no one near to free him, enemies upon all sides, and far from help, even should they not find him, Kiowa Carl did not despair.

Suddenly he dropped down in the grass, for he saw a horse and rider approaching.

The animal was coming on at a walk, his head bent as though he was tired, and his course would lead him directly over Kiowa Carl, unless he again rolled away.

He was about to do this, when another plan flashed into his fertile brain, and he raised up hastily and cast a glance around the prairie.

No one was very near him, excepting the coming horseman.

Eagerly he peered at him and said in triumphant tones:

"It is not Buffalo Bill, that is certain."

A moment after he muttered:

"I'll risk it."

Then, having determined upon what course he would pursue, he called out:

"Ho, pard, this way!"

The horseman came to a sudden halt, and he straightened up in his saddle, while he spoke in a stern tone to his steed, as though to check his further advance.

"Pard, I hain't no foe, but a friend, an' are in distress, too," called out Kiowa Carl, assuming the border dialect and twang.

"Who are you?" asked the soldier, for such he was.

"I are a old trapper, as ther Injuns capter'd an' left heur, tied like a 'possum, while they went on ter tackle ther sojers. I calt to yer, as yer went by chasin' thet durned red, but yer didn't seem ter adzactly heur me."

"No, and curse him, he wounded me in the arm with an arrow and escaped."

"It is so deep I cannot get it out, and it may be poisoned," said the soldier, approaching the spot where the renegade lay.

"Waal, I are ther pilgrim ter git it out fer yer, an' ter tell yer ef it are p'izened, fer I knows all about sich things, hevin' been trapper on ther pararer streams nigh on ter twenty year, an' comed ahead o' ther settlers clean from Ohio ter heur."

The soldier dismounted with some difficulty, and bent over the renegade, who said:

"Jist rip ther thongs loose with yer knife, an' then I'll fix yer all right."

Awkwardly using his left hand, the soldier soon cut the thongs loose and Kiowa Carl was a free man once more.

"Thar, yer hev did it, an' I are almighty obleged ter yer."

"I tried ter git away so as I c'u'd warn yer camp, fer I know'd old Black Face were going ter hit yer hard; but they kept the'r eyes onto me, an' left me heur while they crept ter ther lay-out."

"But it kinder seemed as tho' they bit off more'n they c'u'd chaw, didn't they?"

"They did indeed, for, instead of striking an emigrant train, as they supposed, they got caught in a trap which Buffalo Bill sprung upon them, and I don't believe a dozen escaped."

"Like as not," and the soldier did not see the grim smile that passed over the renegade's face, when he verified his belief that Buffalo Bill had laid a plan to entrap old Black Face.

"If your hands are limber now, I wish you would see about this arrow," said the soldier, "for it hurts me fearfully."

"Likely it's p'izened, ter Injins is ther devil all over."

"Now, let me see, pard."

The arrow had gone into the arm deep, just below the point of the shoulder, and the sleeve of the soldier's uniform was wet with blood.

Taking hold of the arm with one hand, Kiowa Carl said, savagely:

"Man, you are a fool to trust any one on these prairies, and in me you have misplaced your confidence, for I am Kiowa Carl— Hold! one word, or motion, and you die."

He had drawn from his belt, which the Indians had left upon him, a revolver as he spoke, and the terrified soldier saw that he was looking into the muzzle of the weapon, and never opened his lips, though he shrunk backward slightly.

"You have saved my life, and I will not be hard with you, so will let you go, for I wish you to carry a message from me to Buffalo Bill."

"Tell him that Kiowa Carl, the renegade, warned old Black Face that he would be caught in a trap, and the warning was unheeded. And tell him that Kiowa Carl will devote his life to one object, and that is to kill him!"

"This wound is not serious, but my advice is that you go on to camp and let the surgeon dress it for you. But, my gallant trooper, you will have to walk, as I shall borrow your horse. Good-night."

He took the arms away from the silent and alarmed soldier, mounted the patiently waiting horse, and rode away without another word, leaving the surprised and dismounted trooper gazing after him as though spellbound until the darkness hid him from sight.

Then he started toward camp, as fast as he could go, for he was greatly weakened by the loss of blood from his wound.

CHAPTER XIX.

A DOUBLE DUEL.

IN the ambush fight at the Lone Tree, Buffalo Bill had won the admiration of all the soldiers by his reckless courage, and the certainty with which he got every Indian he went for.

When the red skins scattered he had pursued the larger force, most anxious above all things to capture Black Face, the daring chief, who had so long been the bitter foe of the whites, and had spread terror along the border, by the raids he was wont to make with his band of picked warriors.

Still continuing to scatter, Buffalo Bill soon found himself in pursuit of but one red-skin, and his pony soon came up with that one, for he was not mounted upon his white steed, having left him at the fort to rest.

The red-skin had been steadily making for

the river, at a point where the banks were rolling and heavily covered with timber, and Buffalo Bill knew that the savages must have left their horses there.

The fugitive ran well, too, and seemingly untiringly, and the nature of the ground was such that the scout's pony did not come up with him until a mile had been gone over.

Then, seeing that he would be overtaken and shot down, the red-skin, panting like a hound from his tremendous race, grasped his tomahawk before he turned at bay, for he had cast aside his rifle to lessen his weight for running.

Then suddenly he paused, and the tomahawk, hurled with good aim, struck the scout's pony fairly in the head and brought him to earth with a suddenness which sent his rider far over his head.

Nimble as a cat, Buffalo Bill lighted upon his feet, and just as he did so grasped the Indian in his strong arms.

Not expecting but that the scout would fall with his horse the Indian was taken by surprise, and powerful though he was, and a chief second in rank to Black Face, he was no match for the white man, especially as he was tired by his long run.

The struggle therefore was of short duration, and the result was that Buffalo Bill was the victor, the red-skin lying dead at his feet.

But he did not tarry to gloat over his victory, but, tearing the feather head dress from his victim, he put it upon his own head and started on a run for the timber, which was distant but a few hundred yards.

The guard who had halted Kiowa Carl earlier in the evening, still held his post, and had been an alarmed witness to the attack in the distance, and the defeat of his red brothers, for he could hear enough to convince him that Black Face had caught a Tartar.

He had patiently waited to see further developments, well knowing that those of the band who escaped would head for the timber where their ponies were, and his quick eye had detected the dark form of the Indian and his mounted pursuer.

Instantly he had started to get a pony and go to the aid of his brother warrior, and he rode out of the timber just as he saw the Indian turn at bay and the pony and his rider go down.

He could hardly repress the yell of joy that arose to his lips, and yet did so, fearing there might be other pursuers near.

The next instant he saw what he believed to be his fellow-brave spring up from the prairie and come on toward the timber.

He looked closely to assure himself that it was not a foe, and recognizing the eagle head-dress fluttering down the back of the runner, he felt that it must be either Black Face, his chief, or Running Buffalo, the second in command of the band.

It was a buffalo, by name, but Buffalo Bill, and this circumstance the red skin discovered too late to save his life, for, running directly up to him, the scout had him in his grasp and dragged off of his horse in an instant's time.

There was the glimmer of steel, a desperate struggle for a few seconds, and Buffalo Bill stood upright, holding the rein of the frightened pony, while at his feet lay the warrior, dead.

Springing upon the pony he had so pluckily captured, Buffalo Bill rode back to where his own animal lay, and quickly dispatched the wounded beast, for the tomahawk had not fully done its work.

Then, transferring his saddle and bridle to his new steed, the scout rode into the timber where the ponies were tied, and these were soon loosened and set off on a gallop toward the camp at the Lone Tree.

Hearing them coming the soldiers, who had nearly all returned to camp, rallied to repel, as they believed, a charge; but hearing Buffalo Bill's voice calling out to them, they did not fire, and up he dashed with his four-footed captives, to the great delight of Captain Burr and his troopers.

Having dismounted and corralled the ponies, Buffalo Bill learned from Captain Burr that a soldier had come into camp, staggering from weakness from loss of blood, for he had an arrow sticking deep in his arm, and had called for him.

But soon after he had fainted and was then unconscious and in the hands of the surgeon.

But though the surgeon said he would be all right by morning, he hoped, the scout could not wait, but picking out the best pony of the lot that had belonged to the band of Black Face, he bade farewell to Captain Burr and his gallant troopers, and went off like a rocket, to carry his dispatches to Omaha, and the cheers of his comrades followed far out upon the prairie as he sped along through the darkness.

CHAPTER XX.

KIOWA CARL DECIDES WHAT TO DO.

WHEN Kiowa Carl rode off on the horse of the trooper, he made up his mind to yet capture the train of Mr. Markham if in the power of man.

He had fallen desperately in love with Madge, if such affection as he felt can be called love.

and was determined to get her in his power by fair or foul means, and make her his wife whether she was willing or unwilling.

Her releasing him caused him to believe in his vanity that he had won a warm spot in her heart, and should he be with her for awhile, he did not doubt but that he could win her love for all his own.

The train being well on its way to the spot on the Platte, where was the ranch Mr. Markham had purchased, he felt that he must act promptly, and his only dependence was in his Indian allies.

But should he not be able to strike the train on the march, he determined to go to the ranch, and the idea of giving up his fell purpose never entered his mind for an instant.

Having gained a safe distance from the camp, he drew rein to consider as to what he should do.

To go to the village of Black Face would be his safest course; but, perhaps the old chief had been slain in the fight, and if so, he had no influence with other chiefs of the tribe.

What had become of White Panther he could not conjecture, and, as he had been told by Black Face that the renegade had followed him from camp, he knew that it could only be Buffalo Bill he had gone after, and that meant certain death to his pard.

Then the little good in his nature swayed him here, and he muttered:

"Salt Lake Saul has thrice saved my life, and risked his own to do it, and it is my first duty to see what has become of him, and to aid him if he needs it.

"If Buffalo Bill captured him, he will be taken to Omaha, to be identified for the price set on his head, and then his career will be cut short. The Omaha authorities offer the reward, and therefore there he'll be taken, so to Omaha I go to look after old Salt Lake, for the girl will be safe enough at that far-away ranch her father is so foolish as to take her to.

"So to Omaha I go, rig up in a new disguise, and then I can work in safety.

"Then, if I want aid, I will go to the village of Black Face, and see what I can do to get some braves to aid me, and, if I have not the influence with the reds, Salt Lake Saul has, and he'll be glad enough to go with me, if I save his neck.

"Come, old fellow, our trail leads to Omaha," he said, to his horse, and the head of the animal was at once turned in that direction, while his rider again muttered as he rode along:

"If Buffalo Bill captured old Salt Lake Saul, he will go to Omaha to draw his reward, and I may be able to square accounts with him, as well as to get my pard free, for, if that man was dead, I would have little to fear, as the soldiers have no terror for me."

And, about the time Kiowa Carl came to this decision, the person of whom he was speaking was just leaving the Lone Tree camp on his ride to Omaha, to deliver to the commandant there the delayed dispatches.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE FUGITIVE STEED.

BUFFALO BILL was no sparer of horse or human when he had duty to do, and this held good in his ride to Omaha.

Himself he did not care for, as he was riding, and knew that he could stand any amount of fatigue.

But his horse was to be thought of, for he knew he would fail him soon, and he looked about him to decide where he could get another animal.

He remembered a ranch on Beaver Creek, where he would likely be able to get a good horse, and thither he went, to find the cabin had been burned and the cattle run off, and he knew it had been the work of Black Face and his band.

But, as good luck would have it, just as his tired horse could carry him no further, he spied an animal feeding some distance off.

A closer observation, and he gave a shout of joy, for he had been told by Mr. Markham that he had lost a beautiful thoroughbred, a claybank, noted for his speed and wonderful endurance.

The animal had slipped his halter one night, and in the morning could nowhere be found.

Bill remembered the locality where Mr. Markham had told him he had lost the horse, and he knew it was not very far from where he then was.

The silver mane and tail, long and flowing, the perfect buckskin color of the animal, added to his trim build, told Buffalo Bill that he had found the lost animal, and just in the nick of time.

"A fool for luck, and a poor man for children," the soldiers say at the fort, and I must be the former to carry out the saying, for I do happen to be most lucky.

"But now, if I can only catch that horse, I'll be willing to have luck go against me for the next month."

The animal now sighted the scout, and instantly held his shapely head up like a deer scenting danger.

Knowing that his own horse was too tired to

go out of a walk, Bill at once turned him loose, and hit him a blow to make him go some distance from him.

The poor brute trotted off some thirty paces, and the scout at once dropped down behind the bank of the creek, ran along for some distance, and crawled through the long prairie grass directly to where his horse had halted, and stood with drooped head too tired to move.

He would have moved off, however, at seeing the form of the scout crawling in the grass, had he not been checked by a kind word, and in an instant Bill was at his feet.

Gazing in the direction of the fugitive horse, the scout saw that he was approaching slowly and cautiously, now that he no longer saw the rider.

Crouching in the grass, his lariat held in hand, he waited in breathless suspense the cautious and tardy approach of the beautiful animal, who had become quite wild the few days he had been alone on the prairie.

Nearer and nearer he approached, and, as though instinctively knowing what his master wanted, the scout's horse gave a low whinny.

The strange animal at once answered it, and encouraged, came trotting up to his new-found companion, to find himself suddenly struggling in the coils of a lariat.

A shout of triumph burst from the lips of Buffalo Bill at his capture, and in ten minutes' time he had the beautiful beast bridled, saddled, and in perfect control.

"I'll leave you, old fellow, to take care of yourself for a few days," he said, kindly, to the animal that had served him so well, and throwing himself upon the claybank, he darted away like an arrow from a bow.

Hardly had he disappeared over a rise in the prairie, when a man rose from the prairie grass not far from the spot where the horse had been captured.

By his side lay his own steed, dead, having been ridden to death, and fallen in his tracks not ten minutes before Buffalo Bill came in sight.

His eyes also had caught sight of the claybank, and recognized him, too, for the man was the treacherous guide of the Markham train.

And he, too, was plotting his capture, when the sudden coming in sight of his enemy had thwarted his plans, and caused him to witness the triumph of his hated foe.

Bitterly he cursed his ill fortune, and the good luck of Bill Cody.

But, as cursing did not help him on the road to Omaha, he stripped his horse of his saddle and bridle, and shouldering them, trudged along, his heart black with passion and revengeful feelings against the scout, whom he had not dared to risk a shot at, or meet in fair combat, fearing the result.

CHAPTER XXII.

FOREARMED.

BUFFALO BILL found the claybank a better horse by far, than he anticipated, more than justifying all that Mr. Markham and Madge had said regarding him.

The animal had been presented to the maiden when a colt, and she had only ridden him once or twice, as, not being thoroughly broken, he had taxed her strength beyond endurance, and run away with her; but for all that she had enjoyed his easy gait, and fleetness, and regretted his loss greatly.

In his new rider he found a master he readily yielded to, and Buffalo Bill was delighted with the ease and rapidity with which the beautiful animal carried him over ground.

Halting now and then for rest, he found the horse ever ready to continue on the road, and he got into Omaha one night half a dozen hours ahead of what he had deemed possible.

Putting the horse up at a stable, the scout at once sought the commandant and delivered his dispatches, smiling at the remark:

"Well, Cody, you have not tarried by the way."

"You are mistaken, general, for I lost two whole days, and will explain how," was the response of Buffalo Bill, and he then told the general all the particulars of his trip and its interruptions.

"Well, Bill, if you would enter the army as a commissioned officer, to do only frontier work, you would wear the rank of a general on your shoulders before three years, and I guarantee the Indian troubles would be far less frequent than they now are, for it needs just such men as you are to deal with them."

"Thank you, general, but I prefer the free and easy life of a scout to the rank of a regimental commander, for as such I can render good service untrammelled by red tape," responded Bill, with a smile.

"Egad, you are right; but to this Markham and his train, for I met him just before he left?"

"He is rather a superior man, is he not, to bury himself upon the border on a cattle-ranch?"

"So I think, sir, and his daughter is both lovely and refined, yet she seems to love the wild life of the prairies, and I hope will have no cause to regret her coming."

"I sincerely hope with you, for her own sweet sake."

"But as you have killed that devilish renegade, White Panther, there will be far less danger to settlers, I think."

"Kiowa Carl yet lives, sir."

"True, and I guess we can arrange here a price on his head too, and my word for it, you claim the stakes."

"I don't care for blood-money, general; but I'll do all I can to win any reward put upon the head of Kiowa Carl, for I have an old grudge against him, and know he is my bitterest foe."

"When do you wish me to return, sir?"

"In two days, and I can send you as a guide to a supply train which goes to McPherson, if you care to accept the position."

"Certainly, sir, I will do anything that I can be useful in," and promising to see the general the next day, Buffalo Bill declined the invitation he received to put up at the barracks and wended his way into town to a hotel where he was well known to the proprietor.

He had just entered the saloon, to look around for a familiar face, knowing well that that was the place to find any plainsman that might be in town, when the proprietor called him aside.

"Say, Bill," he said, in a whisper, "do you know the fellow known as Kiowa Carl?"

"I do."

"Have you seen him lately?"

"I have."

"Where?"

"Out on the Loup."

"When?"

"Several days ago. But why do you ask, Dolan?"

"Well, a man came into the bar a little while before you returned, and it looked to me strangely like Kiowa Carl, and I knew you would recognize him, if anybody would, so I said nothing, but waited for you."

"Is he there now?"

"No, he has gone to the stables to see about his horses; but he has engaged a room, and will soon return."

"I'll lay for him, and see if it is our man."

"Do so, Bill, for, to tell you the truth, a cattleman came in from the cottonwood some days ago, sold his hoofs, spent considerable money with the boys, and then started home, considerable off for liquor, and this fellow I suspect of being Kiowa Carl came in to-night upon a horse the very counterpart of the one the ranchero had, if it is not the very animal; but the saddle and bridle are not the same."

"Well, I would know Kiowa Carl if he was painted black and wore a woolly wig, and if he is the one who has engaged a room with you, I'll just trump his little game, whatever it may be."

"I know you will, Bill, and I'll keep watch for you, so as to post you when he comes in."

The landlord and Buffalo Bill now stepped away from the window at which they had been standing while talking, and, as they did so, a tall form arose from the shadow outside and glided away in the darkness.

It was Kiowa Carl, and he muttered, as he turned and shook his fist at the hotel:

"You think you would know me, Buffalo Bill, under any disguise, do you?"

"Well, we shall see if I cannot deceive even your eagle eyes."

CHAPTER XXIII.

A SUDDEN DECAP.

AT the time of which I write, some years back, Omaha was a rather lively frontier settlement, far different from the handsome city of to-day, with its elegant residences, massive stores, and only the dust in dry weather, and mud in rainy weather, to make its citizens wretched.

Then it was more of a border settlement, with soldiers, sutlers, traders, teamsters, cowboys, Indians, and last, but by no means least, Indian-fighters and scouts, roving its streets.

There was also another class that was an important making-up of Omaha's citizens, or hangers-on, at the time of which I write, and that was the gambling fraternity, among whom were men who could handle a card with the skill of a "Heathen Chinee," and back up any assertion against their honor with revolver and bowie.

The water of the Missouri not being very palatable, whisky was more largely patronized than the purer fluid, and with the result that about one fourth of the population were constantly in a state of excitement, which only blood-letting could cool off.

It is needless to say that many got their blood cooled, and others so summarily and decidedly that it ever remained so, and it was a regret with the better class of citizens that numerous others of the turbulent kind were not "snuffed out" also.

In this community Buffalo Bill was well known to all, by name, if not personally.

He was noted as the scout of the border, the dearest shot, best horseman, worst hand with the knife, and a man to stick to the trail of a

bad Indian or foe with the instinct of a bloodhound and the tenacity of a bulldog.

An open-faced, generous-hearted man, ever ready to help a friend or stranger in distress, he had yet shown terrific tiger claws when brought to bay by those who wished to ride him down and rid the country of one they dreaded.

Upon entering the saloon, therefore, after his short chat with the landlord, Buffalo Bill was greeted with shouts of welcome, and innumerable invitations to

"Take su'thin', Bill."

Bill was considerably fatigued with his hardships of the past few days, and willingly acquiesced in the pressing invitation, by inviting all hands round to drink with him, as he said:

"Pards, I've got some hundred invitations to drink now, and if I accepted all, I'd get gloriously drunk, so we'll compromise by all drinking with me."

The compromise was accepted, and after paying the score, a by no means light one, Buffalo Bill took a seat at a table, where he could face both doors, and took up a paper to read.

Thus passed an hour or more, and, interested in the newspaper, he seemed utterly oblivious to the excitement and wild clamor around him, yet not a person came in at the door that he did not see, and observing the landlord approaching him, he said, quietly:

"Well, Dolan, he has not come in yet."

"Nor will he."

"What's up?"

"He has fled."

"Not?"

"Fact, for he heard all we said?"

"How do you know this?"

"I got tired waiting for him to come, so went out to the stable and asked for him."

"Well?"

"Dan, my stableman, said he had seen him coming out there, when he stopped, turned back, and stood outside by the window, while you and I were standing inside."

"Then he heard what we said," was Buffalo Bill's quiet remark.

"Of course, and skipped."

"But where did he go?"

"Dan said he thought he had gone back into the house, until he saw him steal away from the window, and then start up the street."

"He left his horse?"

"Yes."

"Did he leave anything in his room?"

"He had nothing to leave in the shape of luggage, though he had plenty of money, for I saw it when he asked me to join him in a drink."

"Describe him, please, Dolan."

"A tall man, with beard cut short, no mustache, and dressed in black."

"He looked like an itinerant parson."

"Kiowa Carl was differently dressed, had a full beard and mustache, long hair, and looked like the itinerant devil he is."

"But he could have cut off his mustache, cropped his beard and hair, and put on a black suit, for the one he wore was strangely like that the ranchero had on, of whom I told you."

"Yes, he's no leopard, and can change his spots; but I think I should know Kiowa Carl under any disguise—Ha! what's the row there?" and Buffalo Bill sprung to his feet, and soon cleared a way through the crowd to where a little mischief was going on which he thought called for his interference.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A STRANGER IN OMAHA.

THE excitement was certainly above the average, in the Overland Saloon, to attract the attention of Buffalo Bill.

But, accustomed as he was to wild scenes, the oaths and loud voices, often in anger, of the rough crowd about him, he yet, in spite of seeming indifference, heard and saw much that was going on, which few believed that he noticed.

While talking with the landlord, and interested in the disappearance of the suspected man, he had suddenly heard in pleading tones the cry:

"Gentlemen, for God's sake don't harm me, for I am only a poor cripple, and a stranger in your town."

"Yer swallow hain't crippled, ef yer leg are, an' durned ef yer sha'n't take benzine with us, ef we hes ter pour it down yer," said a rude voice in reply.

"That are so, pard, fer we axed him ter drink, an' he refused jist ter insult us, an' he drinks, or I are a liar."

"But, gentlemen, I never drink, and you would not force me," was said in pleading tones, and many present were touched, yet dared utter no remonstrance, as the "gang" who had the stranger in their power were a lot to be dreaded by those who wished to keep out of the grave.

The one they insisted should drink with them was a rather pitiable-looking object, and should have excited compassion in the heart of any one.

He was badly crippled, one leg seeming to be

bent and drawn up, which made him painfully lame, while he stooped, and was hump-backed.

His face was smoothly shaven, his hair cut too short to comb, and his attire was evidently the cast-off clothing of some large man who had taken pity upon him.

He wore green spectacles, as though his eyes were affected, was by no means cleanly-looking, and evidently carried his worldly goods with him, for a ragged blanket and overcoat, and a small bundle, with a handkerchief serving as carpet-bag, hung on the end of a stick.

He had entered the hotel, asked the clerk for lodgings at half-price, and been referred to the landlord, who was talking with Buffalo Bill in the bar.

Upon making the effort to reach Landlord Dolan, he had been spied by the "Terrors," as the gang who seized him was called, and his strange appearance at once excited their ridicule, instead of their compassion.

"Say, pards, heur's a What-Is-It; so let's hev a leetle fun," cried the discoverer of the poor wretch.

"What 'll yer take for it, Tom?" asked another.

"It hain't fer sale at no price, fer I are goin' ter travel with it an' skeer Injuns off ther trail."

"Whar did yer ketch it, Tom?"

"It hed clum a tree, an' pulled it up arter it, when I shooted, an' down it dropped."

"See; I hit it thar fust, an' broke its leg, an' next time I struck it squar' in ther back, an' yer see ther swellin' hev'n't yit gone down."

All this time Terror Tom had the poor cripple by the shoulder with iron grip, wheeling him about for inspection, and referring to the deformity of his back when he spoke of the "swellin' not hev'n't gone down."

"Give it a drink, Tom," cried one.

"Yas; see ef it guzzles lickar."

"Pour benzine down him, an' set him on fire ter see him skip lively."

"Well, durned ef I don't pickle him with a leetle fire-water, fer fear he may spile. Come, Hum'back, take a glass o' speerits."

"I never drink, sir," faintly said the cripple.

"Waal, yer does, when I shouts treat," responded the enraged bully, in a savage tone.

"No, sir; I am bad enough deformed, God knows, without being a drunkard," was the reply.

"Furies! he are a-preachin', or I are drunk!" shouted one.

"I am no preacher, sir; only I do not drink."

"I says yer does, he says yer does, we says yer does, as ther school grammar says, an' yer hes ter obey, or I'll trim thet knapsack yer carries on yer back," was the brutal remark.

All the crowd had now gathered around, attracted by the strange cripple and his persecutors, and seemingly in terror, he gave vent to the appealing cry that had attracted the attention of Buffalo Bill.

Forcing his way through the crowd, he soon stood in front of the poor wretch, and then a silence fell upon all, for the scout was recognized, and it was evident that he intended taking the part of the "under dog in the fight," as it was his custom to do.

CHAPTER XXV.

CRIPPLE KIT.

"WELL, my friend, what seems to be the matter?"

Buffalo Bill addressed the poor cripple, and spoke in a kindly tone as he stepped in front of him, where he stood cowering under the heavy clutch of Terror Tom upon his shoulder.

"I am but a poor cripple, sir, and a stranger in town, and these gentlemen wish to force me to take a drink."

"They will not make you drink if you do not wish to."

"Oh, yes they will, for they say so."

"Men don't always do all they threaten," was the quiet response of Buffalo Bill, and then he asked:

"Have you no friends in town?"

"No, sir, nor in the world."

"I am all alone."

This was said in a tone sufficient to touch almost any heart; but the bullies only laughed rudely, and one of them broke out in song with:

"I'm lonely since my friends all died."

A laugh followed this musical burst, and wheeling upon the singer, Buffalo Bill said sternly:

"You'll sing another song, Dagger Dave, if you don't let this poor fellow alone, and I mean it for all of your bullying gang."

All drew their breath and waited, for these bold words of Buffalo Bill showed his utter defiance of the Terrors, and was as much as a challenge for them to accept, if so they willed.

"And what song mou't that be, Buffalo Bill?" asked Dagger Dave, who had won his name from always carrying a long Spanish dagger, upon the hilt of which his hand now dropped.

"Do they miss me at home," or words to that effect," replied Buffalo Bill with a light laugh, and half-turning to Terror Tom, he continued, when the laugh subsided:

"Terror Tom, take your hand off that poor fellow."

"Is you my master, Buffalo Bill, to give orders?"

"This man is no match for any one of you, as you know; he is a stranger, and a cripple, and I will not see him imposed on by any gang of bullies, such as I know you to be."

These were hard words, and the only surprise of the crowd was that the Terrors did not then and there spring upon Buffalo Bill.

But they were at heart cowards, and each one knew that one of them, if not more, would die, for Buffalo Bill was as quick as lightning in drawing a weapon, and as deadly as Death in using it, and which one of them would fall, none could tell, and that very circumstance made them go slow.

"I'll show you who is master, if you don't let go that man, Terror Tom."

"You may run Omaha, because the people don't want trouble with you; but you can't impose on that poor wretch while I am here."

Terror Tom glanced at his two comrades, and then, as he knew he must do something, or "take water" before hundreds whom he had bullied and who feared him, he tightened his grip upon the shoulder of the cripple, while he cried:

"I'll cl'ar ther room fer action, Buffalo Bill, so out ther winder goes yer pet, fer fear he mou't get hurt in ther scrimmage that are to be."

Terror Tom was a man of herculean build, and the cripple, drawn up, bent, and lame, did not come up to his shoulder, and it looked as though "out of the window" he must go, if the bully made the effort to pitch him out.

And make the effort Terror Tom did, but, to the surprise of all, before he could swing the cripple from his feet, he received a blow in the face that sent him to earth with a shock that shook the house, and stunned him, too.

And it was the cripple who gave the blow, straight out from the shoulder, full in the brutal face, and with a force that was terrific.

Buffalo Bill had sprung forward to aid the cripple, but, seeing that if driven to it he was able to protect himself, he turned, as a shot was heard, and a bullet passed through his hat.

It was the last shot that man ever fired, for, before he could draw trigger a second time, Buffalo Bill dropped him dead in his tracks with his revolver, and then turning just in time, caught the knife of Dagger Dave upon his weapon, snapped the blade, and seizing his assailant in his strong arms threw him bodily out of the window, carrying sash with him, with a crash and jingle that was deafening.

"There's another window for you, Terror Tom," cried Buffalo Bill seizing the king bully as he was scrambling to his feet and dragging him to the window.

"Carry the sash with you, Tom," he continued, and with an exhibition of his marvelous strength, which raised a yell of admiration from the crowd, he hurled the giant bully through the other window into the yard, giving him a fall of several feet, and sending him to join Dagger Dave, who was collecting himself together for flight, gashed with glass, bleeding, and thoroughly cowed.

"Run, pards, Bufler Bill are comin' ter bury yer this time," yelled a spectator out of the window, and the two desperadoes quickly made tracks toward the stable, dazed, bleeding, and utterly unable to account for how it all occurred.

"Pard, you hit as hard as a Government mule can kick, and that is saying volumes."

"Give me your hand for the neat way in which you sent Terror Tom to earth, and tell me your name," said Buffalo Bill, stepping toward the cripple, who, after his knock-down of Terror Tom, stood as innocently by as though an uninterested spectator of the affair.

"My name is Cripple Kit," he said, in his soft tones, almost womanly in their sweetness.

"You were not christened Cripple Kit?" answered Buffalo Bill, with a smile.

"No, sir, but I am such a deformity I soon got the name, and it has stuck to me through life, and will doubtless be put on my tomb, if I get one," was the sad reply.

"Where do you hail from?"

"The East."

"And have come West to live?"

"It looked awhile ago as though I had come West to die, and if it had not been for you, I fear they would have killed me, and, deformed as I am, I love life."

"Most people do; but what do you expect to go at out here?"

"Anything I can get to do."

"Well, I'll see if I can help you."

"Come, gentlemen, let us have a drink, and, Dolan, please have that poor fellow buried at my expense, and send in the bill for your windows, too," and Buffalo Bill pointed to the man he had slain, whose body lay in the corner where it had fallen, a bullet in the brain.

"Never mind the glass, Bill, for it was worth the expense to see you break them with Dagger Dave and Terror Tom, and as for Flighty, the town will bury him and give you a vote of thanks for giving it the opportunity."

"Pard, you'll join Bill, I s'pose?" and Dolan turned to Cripple Kit, who answered:

"No, thank you, I never drink."

"Then don't tech it, pard, fer it are a durned good 'rastler, an' I hes yet ter see ther gerloot it can't down in a reg'lar stand-up meetin'. A leetle Rye straight, boss," and the individual who had started out on a temperance lecture to Cripple Kit, ended his harangue by taking "four fingers" undiluted, and with a smack of relief he added:

"I drinks a leetle myself, Pard Cripple, but it are my custom never to desart a old friend, an' speerits an' me has been acquainted too long fer me to go back on 'em when I are hast'nin' ter ther tomb—fill the glass up ag'in, boss, thet I may propose a toast ter Buf'ler Bill."

This ingenious device to get a second drink, "ter keep t'other from bein' lonesome," was successful, and all stood ready with their glasses, while Temperance Jerry—so called from preaching and never practicing—cried in stentorian tones:

"Pards, hear are ter Buf'ler Bill, ther Prince o' ther Platte, an' a man who never desarted ther trail o' a friend or a foe."

The toast was drank with gusto, and, in the excitement that followed, Buffalo Bill, Cripple Kit and Landlord Dolan left the saloon to the noisy revelers.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A RECOMMENDATION.

THE scene in the saloon created quite an excitement in Omaha, and made Buffalo Bill far more of a hero than ever before.

His having killed one of the Terrors, and so summarily squelched the others, for they had not been heard from since the fracas, added to the purity of the atmosphere in town.

Early the next morning he went on the search, and set a score of other trusty men at the same work, for Kiowa Carl; but nowhere could the renegade be found.

The horse he had ridden into Omaha was proven to be the property of the ranchero, for his dead body had been found by the trail side, a bullet in his head, and his clothing gone.

It was evident then that his murderer had robbed him, and then taken his clothing, and, as his suit tallied with the one worn by the man whom Dolan, the landlord, had suspected was the renegade, it seemed beyond cavil that he was right in his suspicion.

The horse still remaining in the stable proved that the owner, or at least the one who had left it there, was afraid to show himself to claim his alleged property.

Two days after the arrival of Buffalo Bill in Omaha, a courier arrived from Fort Laramie, and he was at once sought out by the scout, who knew him well.

It was Texas Jack, a scout and plainsman who has, like Buffalo Bill, won a name that will long live in song and story.

"Well, Bill, I was just going to strike your trail, for I have a message for you."

"How are you, old pard?" and Texas Jack grasped the outstretched hand of Buffalo Bill with the grip of true friendship.

"I'm glad to see you, Jack, and suppose you came by McPherson and Kearney, and are just from Laramie?"

"Yes, I come through on the jump, and start back to-morrow."

"I stopped over at both McPherson and Kearney, and saw the boys just coming in, after your fight at Lone Tree."

"They were full of talk about you, Bill, and boasting over your little plan to wipe out old Black Face, and which nearly succeeded—but is this a friend of yours, Bill?" and Jack turned to Cripple Kit, who had come there with Buffalo Bill.

"Yes, Jack; and a good fellow he is."

"Cripple Kit, this is my friend, Texas Jack, of whom you have heard."

The two men grasped hands, and Jack said in his free and easy style:

"You are my friend, too, if you call Buffalo here, pard."

"Glad to see you, sir; but, Bill, the boys gathered in just thirty-seven scalps that morning after the Lone Tree fracas, and are betting that you got four or five."

"I took odds that you belted half-a-dozen top-knots, for I know you, Bill, so tell me if I win or lose?"

"You win, Jack," was the quiet reply.

"How many?"

"Seven."

"You were in it thick, but that's your style."

"No, we gave them a direct surprise, and the Indians were thick, and I could not miss," modestly said Bill.

"They found running Buffalo, but his hair was gone."

"Yes, I got it."

"And Black Face escaped?"

"I suppose so, if the soldiers did not get him."

"Well, they didn't; and there was another villain who got away, too."

"Who was that, Jack?"

"That renegade, Kiowa Carl."

"He was not there."

"You are mistaken, Bill."

"No; he escaped from the Markham train, stole the horse of the one who let him go, and struck south, for I followed his trail a short distance."

"It was a blind, for he doubled on his trail, and a wounded Indian said he came up and told Black Face the Camp at Lone Tree was a trap; but the chief had been fooled by you so cleverly in playing the renegade, that he did not believe Kiowa, swore that he had some motive in keeping him from attacking the train, so bound him and left him on the prairie."

"And he was captured?" cried Buffalo Bill, eagerly.

"Not he; for Satan took care of him."

"But how?"

"He hailed a soldier who had chased Black Face, and been wounded by him, and then turned back to camp."

"Well?"

"He told the soldier that he was a trapper, who had been captured by the Indians, and then disarmed the cavalryman, took his horse, and left."

"He's a gay one, Jack."

"Indeed he is, Bill; but he sent his compliments to you, the boys said."

"To me?"

"Yes; he told the soldier to tell you that he would yet have your life or words to that effect, but the cavalryman fainted from loss of blood upon reaching camp, and failed to see you, so I give you the message."

"Much obliged, Jack."

"Now tell me if you know anything about the Markham train?"

"Yes; it was going on all right to the ranch, when I met it, and Bill, isn't Miss Markham a beauty?"

"She is a very lovely lady, Jack."

"She thinks a great deal of you, for she told me so."

"Much obliged for her good opinion of me."

"And her old father just swears by you."

"You are full of blarney, Jack; is there anything you want me to do for you?" laughed Buffalo Bill.

"Yes."

"Name it."

"Go back with me as far as McPherson."

"Can't do it, for I carry a train back, that goes clear through to Denver."

"Too bad, for I hoped for your company."

"But you can do something for me, Jack."

"I'm your man, Bill."

"My friend here, Cripple Kit, as he calls himself, wants to go on a ranch as a cowboy."

"He is a good rider, in spite of his lameness, and I will send him to Mr. Markham, who asked me to send him several good men for his ranch, and I want you to drop him there as you go by, for he is not a plainsman, to find the way alone."

"I'll do it, but his horse must be a good one, as I go fast, as you know, Bill."

"It will try your horse to keep up with the one he rides, for I give him to take back to Mr. Markham, a claybank, that got away from the train, and which I caught on my way here, and I will frankly say that I never backed a better horse for speed and wind."

"Well, I'll be glad of Kit's company, I assure you, and I start to-morrow at dawn on the return."

"You will give me a letter, sir, please, to Mr. Markham?" asked Cripple Kit, humbly.

"Yes, if you wish it," and at break of day the following morning, Texas Jack started on his way back to Fort Laramie, with Cripple Kit for his companion, and mounted upon the splendid claybank horse.

In his pocket he carried a letter to Mr. Markham from Buffalo Bill, which read:

"MY DEAR SIR:

"The bearer, whom I know only by the name of Cripple Kit, I was so fortunate as to befriend a few days ago, when he got into trouble, through the insults of bullies on account of his deformities."

"He is humble, faithful, and by no means a bad man to have on a place, and, as he is desirous of a situation on a ranch, to make himself generally useful, I give him this letter to you, hoping that you can find something for him to do."

"A home, rather than wages, he says, is what he wants, and feeling a sympathy for the poor, homeless, unfortunate fellow, I feel that with you he will not be friendless."

"I send by Kit your claybank horse, which I was so fortunate as to catch on my way to Omaha."

"I found him a superb animal, well deserving the praise you bestowed upon him."

"I may add, what you perhaps have heard, that we ambushed Black Face, the ally of Kiowa Carl, and his band, and nearly wiped them out."

"As the renegade is at large, permit me to suggest that you keep a sharp watch for him, and if he crosses your path show him no mercy, for he is merciless."

"My remembrances to Miss Markham and Miss Doolittle, and believe me,

"Yours to command,

"BUFFALO BILL."

This letter of recommendation the scout told Cripple Kit to read, and then hand to Mr. Markham, who, without doubt, would give him a

place in his home, and the friendless fellow seemed overjoyed at the prospect of becoming no longer a football of cruel fate, to be scoffed at and kicked through life by those who should have pitied his infirmities and not ridiculed one upon whom the hand of Nature had fallen so heavily.

CHAPTER XXVII.

SUNSET REST.

IT was with longing eyes and eager hearts that both Mr. Markham and his daughter glanced over the rolling prairie, when they knew that their new home could not be far away.

Miss Doolittle primped up, and threatened to join Madge on horseback in honor of the occasion; but it was a threat she had made often before and never carried into effect, though she constantly wore her riding-habit, and Pepper had frequently saddled and bridled her horse, hoping to entice her upon his back.

From Fort Kearney Buffalo Bill had sent a guide to meet the train, and he had carried them safely along on their trail, with no dread that one whom the noted scout had recommended could go wrong, or get them into danger.

He was a man of striking appearance, most commanding presence, and his name was known along the border from the Missouri to the Rio Grande, as one whose life had been full of desperate dangers, daring deeds and romance.

Upon the army pay-roll he was put down as "J. B. Hikok, Scout, Guide and Hunter," but throughout the land his fame had spread under the name of "Wild Bill."

The boon companion of Buffalo Bill on many a deadly trail and bivouac of danger, he had willingly granted the request of his brother scout to go and meet the Markham train and guide it to its destination.

Over six feet, perfectly formed, a giant in strength, and a handsome man, with a dark, stern face, and courtly manners, he had impressed Mr. Markham and Madge at once as one in whom perfect trust could be placed.

To several of the teamsters he was known by sight, and to all was his name as familiar as a household word.

Under his guidance therefore the train pulled along well, now and then meeting with a courier or hunter from the forts, who confided to Wild Bill all the news, for news flies fast on the prairies, even as it does in civilization.

"Do you see that line of silver, Miss Markham, just coming out from behind the timber, and winding around that green roll of the prairie like a belt?" asked Wild Bill, as he sat on his horse, waiting for Mr. Markham and his daughter to come up, for he had ridden on ahead of the train.

"Yes, Mr. Hikok, and is it not beautiful?" returned Madge, with enthusiasm at the lovely scene.

"I think so, for I love these almost treeless plains as dearly as the sailor does the ocean."

"But I will not keep you in suspense, but tell you that beyond that timber is your new home, and you will find it a sweet resting-place in our sunset land."

"Oh, Mr. Hikok! you have named our home, for, father, can we not call it Sunset Rest?" cried Madge, gleefully.

"Yes, my child, for it is a very pretty name, and to the poetry in our guide's nature we owe it," answered Mr. Markham.

Another half-mile, and through the timber the walls of a comfortable cabin were visible, and, unable to restrain her longing to see her new home, Madge galloped on with her father and Wild Bill, leaving the train to follow more slowly, but with a quickened pace, when it became known that the haven of rest was just before them.

A gallop of several miles over the swelling prairie brought the three to the banks of the Platte, and before them was spread a lovely scene.

The clump of timber, like an oasis in the desert, sheltered a large and substantially built cabin of eight rooms, so modeled as to be like a Mexican hacienda, for it formed a square, with a plaza within some forty feet in diameter.

The logs were solid, well hewn, and the cabin was well put together for comfort and strength and resistance, while in the rear were outbuildings of a most imposing character for a frontier home.

Across the front of the cabin was a wide piazza, upon which three rooms opened, and before it ran the Platte, to whose banks sloped a level lawn that would have done credit to an Eastern home.

The river was about a hundred paces from the house, and upon its banks, half-hidden in a clump of willows, was an arbor, showing that the former proprietor had an eye to improvement and comfort.

Further up the river were the cattle corrals, and a couple of cabins for the cowboys, and, altogether, Sunset Rest panned out so much better than either Mr. Markham or Madge had anticipated from all they had seen while en route, that they were both perfectly charmed with

their new home, and expressed themselves so in delighted tones, while Miss Doolittle clapped her hands in ecstasy, and Coon danced a double-shuffle behind the ambulance when they came up and beheld their new home in the prairies.

Far out upon the prairie were visible a few hundred head of cattle, fat and sleek, and which had been included in Mr. Markham's purchase, and coming toward them with curiosity to see the "new boss," were several cowboys, who had been left in charge of the place.

"Pard, yer looks squar' clean through, an' we is glad ter see yer, an' as fer yer darter, thar hain't a flower on ther whole Nerbrasky paraders thet kin compar' with her fer beauty o' looks, nor a willer on ther Platte that are more grace ul."

"But I'm durned ef I kin say es much fer ther t'other petticoat, fer she are a leetlooff ther meridian o' life, an' ef she got a leetle hot, looks as tho' she'd turn a daisy sour."

"As fer ther teamsters, they looks clean grit, ther boy hain't nobody's fool, yer lay-out are a prime one, but of ther niggers ther least I hes ter say, ther more more they'll enjy it."

"I are, cap'n, fer you is our cap'n now, Platte Paul, ther chief o' ther cowboys, an' these heur galoots is my pards, Mustang Mack, an' Prairie Pete, an' they is free, white, an' twenty-one."

"Cap'n, you is welcome, an' so is yer lay-out."

This most characteristic welcome was received by Mr. Markham and Madge as it was meant, in the best of feeling; but Miss Doolittle looked daggers at Platte Paul for his frankness, while Coon remarked, *sotto voce*, to Phillis:

"I'd talk back, gal, ter thet poor white trash, ef he didn't hev that big whip dey calls a bull-whacker."

"Golly! it's bigger den de oberseer's whip on de ole plantashun, an' I t'ort dat were luminous."

"It were, chile, but dis hern are luminouser, an' ef yer don't keep yer mouf shut, ye'll find it am a nigger-whacker too, fer dat man hab got it in him not ter like us, honey."

"You speaks de trufe now, Phillis, chile, an' I inten's ter lay low an' keep dark when he are round."

"Yas, we'll bofe ob us keep dark," echoed Phillis.

"There is no doubt but what you will, for the rest of your natural existence," muttered Pepper, who, without playing eavesdropper, had heard the conversation between the dark-complexioned pair.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

NEW ARRIVALS AT SUNSET REST.

THE feeling of perfect rest which came over Mr. Markham and Madge, upon finding themselves at their journey's end, can only be felt by those who know what it is to go to a home they have long had in anticipation, and find better than their imagination had pictured.

In the halt made, the wagons were no longer arranged in a circle, but were drawn up near the cabin to unload, when the house had been opened and thoroughly aired, which Miss Doolittle at once set to work to do with a will.

The chickens and other fowls were soon turned loose in the poultry yards, the pigs and sheep found their proper abiding places, the cattle were sent to the barnyards and the horses to the stables, so that it was not an hour before affairs began to look really homelike.

Wild Bill and the cowboys worked with a will, and when darkness settled down upon the prairie, all were tired out and most willing to rest.

The cowboys kept watch, giving those of the train a chance to rest, and all arose with the early dawn contented and refreshed, for they had no more journeying, as the end of their long trail had been reached.

Wild Bill was enjoying his last breakfast with Mr. Markham and family, for his horse was ready saddled to carry him back to the fort, when Prairie Pete reported some horsemen in sight.

They had not yet moved into the cabin, as Miss Doolittle insisted they should live in tents for a few days, until the house was thoroughly aired, so Wild Bill arose, leveled his glass at the distant horsemen and said:

"There is one man I would know among a thousand."

"Buffalo Bill?" cried Madge, suddenly, and with evident pleasure, and seeing that Wild Bill smiled, she added:

"I mean, is it Mr. Cody?"

"No."

"Not Kiowa Carl, certainly?" said Mr. Markham, with some anxiety of tone.

"No, I only wish it was," replied Wild Bill, significantly.

"Oh, do tell us, good Mr. Wild Bill," urged Miss Doolittle in her sweetest tones, and with a smile she meant to be irresistible.

"It is Texas Jack, one of the finest prairie men on the border."

"The other I do not know, at least at this distance."

"I have heard of Texas Jack almost as often as I have of yourself and Buffalo Bill," said Mr. Markham.

"Yes, he is up at Laramie on duty now, and and is doubtless coming from Omaha, where he has been with dispatches," explained Wild Bill.

At a swift gait the two horsemen now came forward, and, as they drew nearer, Madge, who had been watching their approach most attentively, cried out:

"Father, if I am not vastly mistaken, one of those men is mounted upon Yellow Chief."

"No, not our lost claybank?"

"Yes, sir; look for yourself."

Mr. Markham did look, and instantly said:

"You are right, Madge, for it is the Yellow Chief."

"Do tell! how strange that Providence should have brought him right back to you, like a stray sheep to the fold," said Miss Doolittle.

"It is not Providence that is bringing him, miss, but a man whose appearance is not altogether elegant," said Wild Bill, and as the two horsemen dashed up just then, he stepped forward and cried:

"Well, Jack, old fellow, where from and whither bound?"

"On the trail to Laramie, Bill, and out of Omaha."

"It does my eyes good to see you, old pard."

The speaker, Madge, and I may add Miss Doolittle also, saw was a man with an open, fearless and handsome face, full of sunshine, and with long curling hair falling upon his shoulders and a slight mustache which failed to hide his white, even teeth.

His form was well-knit, denoting great strength and endurance, his hands and feet remarkably small, and his movements quick and lithe.

He was dressed in a suit of buckskin, elegantly beaded and porcupine-quilled, and wore his leggings stuck in the tops of boots that a major-general would have envied.

His shoulders were broad and massive, his waist slender, and encircled by a belt in which were revolvers and bowie.

The horse he rode was a sorrel, gaunt and showing evidence of speed and bottom, and his accouterments were thoroughly Mexican, even to the massive bit, and the broad, silver-mounted horn of the saddle.

One side of his broad sombrero was looped up with a pin, a Texas star, made out of a twenty-dollar gold piece.

The companion of Texas Jack needs no description, for the reader recognizes him as Cripple Kit.

"And I am glad to see you, Jack, for I am just about starting on the sunset trail."

"Then we go together."

"Yes; but permit me to present you to Mr. Markham, Miss Markham and Miss Doolittle, whom I have just guided to their new home, at the request of Buffalo Bill."

"Mr. Markham, as I told you when I recognized him, this is Texas Jack, or Mr. J. B. Omohundro, and his name is sufficient to tell you more than I can say regarding him."

Jack raised his sombrero at the introduction, bowed low to the ladies, and took Mr. Markham's offered hand and shook it warmly, while he said:

"I have brought you one of Cody's *protégés*, Mr. Markham, whom I can only introduce as Cripple Kit, not knowing him by any other name."

"But he has a letter from Bill which will explain all to you."

Cripple Kit had now slipped down from his horse, and limping up to Mr. Markham coiled his hat, and handing him the letter given him by Buffalo Bill, said in his low, soft tones:

"I hope, sir, my appearance, hideous as it is, will not cause you to decide against me."

Mr. Markham was too well-bred to even glance at the man's ill shape, but hastily reading the letter, answered in his hearty way:

"Any one whom Mr. Cody recommends, sir, can find a place in my home."

"I do need good men, and will be glad to have you."

"Oh! thank you, sir," said Kit, with a trembling voice, and to make him feel at ease Mr. Markham said:

"Madge, and Miss Doolittle, Mr. Cody has sent me just such a person as I will need to help us about our new home."

"Your name is Kit, I believe?"

"Yes, sir, Cripple Kit."

"Well, Kit, I am glad you have come, and also that you bring us back the truant Yellow Chief."

"I hope you left Cody well?"

"Yes, sir."

"Will we see him soon, do you think?"

"I really cannot tell, sir."

"Oh! he'll be along this way before many weeks, for Buffalo Bill is never still," said Jack.

"Well, he will ever have a warm welcome in my home, as will also all his friends."

"But come, Phillis has replenished our breakfast, and you must be hungry, so join us, please."

Cripple Kit shrunk back, but Madge seeing it, called to him, kindly:

"There is a seat for you, too, sir," and then turning to Jack, she continued:

"And now tell us, please, how Mr. Cody managed to get Yellow Chief in his possession?"

Texas Jack was only too willing to talk about his pard Bill, and told all he knew about him, while he called upon Cripple Kit to relate the story of his meeting with the scout.

This Kit did in his low, soft tones, and there was that about the poor cripple that created a sympathy for him, which told him he would find a pleasant home in Sunset Rest, and after breakfast he saw Texas Jack and Wild Bill ride away with no regret that he was left behind.

CHAPTER XXIX.

PEPPER'S DISLIKE.

IT was but a very short time after the arrival of Cripple Kit before Mr. Markham decided that he had gained a treasure in the unfortunate man.

He proved himself invaluable to Miss Doolittle in a hundred ways, and quite won that lady's regard.

He was a perfect horseman in spite of his drawn-up leg, and was wont to accompany Madge frequently, in her rides over the prairie, while Mr. Markham gave him full charge of the stables.

Platte Paul being the cowboy chief, the teamsters that were, had been turned over to his charge, and he set to work, under Mr. Markham's direction, to build sheds for the cattle, and to plant grain and vegetables in fertile ground, which was fenced in with rails the timber motte supplied in abundance.

In fact, Sunset Rest soon began to look like a well-organized farm, rather than a prairie ranch, and no more comfortable and pretty home could be found on the border than was it, for Madge had done much to beautify the grounds, besides her indoor work which made the home look most cosy.

Coon and Phillis seemed in their element, and Pepper was apparently as happy as a lark in a meadow.

Yet Pepper was the one exception that did not seem to like Cripple Kit.

Why, he could not exactly tell, for Kit was always most kind to him, and seemed to feel that the youth did not like him.

Madge noticed it also, and one day questioned the youth upon the subject.

"How do you think Mr. Cody's *protégé* gets along, Pepper?" she asked.

"He is a hard-working man, miss, and seems never to be idle."

"And what he does he does well?"

"Indeed he does, miss."

"Yet, while you praise him, Pepper, you do not seem to like him?"

"Don't I, miss?"

"Do you?"

"Well, miss, I have nothing against him."

"He is kind to you?"

"Always, Miss Madge."

"Then what is it, Pepper?"

"Who said I did not like him, miss?"

"No one."

"What makes you think so then, Miss Madge?"

"I will tell you, Pepper, th t I have watched you closely, and found you gazing at Cripple Kit with a look in which there was not one atom of regard."

"Strange, miss, and yet I have nothing against him."

"Do you know anything about him?"

"No, miss."

"Never saw him before he came here?"

"Not I, miss."

"Nor heard of him?"

"No."

"Then what is it?"

"Miss Madge, I cannot tell what it is, but somehow I do not like Cripple Kit."

"I have tried hard to do so, and have wondered why it was that I did not, for he is as good to me as a brother could be."

"But it is no use, for when I look him in the face it seems to me as though I saw into his heart, and it don't look honest."

"You mean that he may be other than he pretends to be?"

"He may be, miss; but, poor fellow, it seems a shame for me to doubt him."

"Especially, Pepper, when you, too, are playing a part."

The youth's face flushed crimson, he drooped his eyes, and, after an instant, stammered out:

"I don't—don't—un—derstand y—y—ou, Miss Madge."

"I mean that you are not what you seem, for you have seen better days, Pepper, and some sorrow has driven you to this wild land, which you keep hidden from the eyes of all under an assumed manner of gayety, which does not come from your heart."

"Oh, Miss Madge," and the tears welled up into the fine eyes of the boy.

"Never mind, Pepper, I like you, and will be your friend, only don't judge poor Cripple Kit harshly, and try and be kind to him, for he deserves all the pity we can give him, for his is a hard lot, deformed as he is."

"I will, miss, for I do feel sorry for a man who has to bear the cross he does through life."

and I could even forgive a man so deformed in body, for having a heart that was bitter and even wicked."

"You are a strange boy, Pepper," said Madge, as she turned away and entered the house, leaving the youth weeding the flower garden, for the maiden loved not flowers more than he did.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE RED TRAIL OF THE TROOPERS.

BUFFALO BILL sat alone in his quarters at the fort reading over his mail, which had arrived for him during his absence on a three weeks' scouting expedition into the Indian country.

The hope that Black Face had been slain the night of the Lone Tree fight, had soon faded away when that wary old chief, with a new band of warriors dashed down upon the settlements some weeks after the battle, spreading death and ruin behind him.

Having guided the Government train down into Colorado, Buffalo Bill had returned to his post of duty just after the daring raid of Black Face, and an expedition was organized to go into the Indian country and strike his camp.

Remembering the exposed situation of Mr. Markham's ranch, and what a scene of sorrow must follow there in the trail of the red-skins, Buffalo Bill was the more anxious to cripple their power all he could so as to prevent such a catastrophe falling upon the home of his friends.

With Captain Burr in command, and four companies of gallant troopers at his back, Buffalo Bill led the party directly north toward the Nebraska.

He knew pretty well about the locality of the village of Black Face, and having gained a secure hiding-place for the cavalry, in a deep canyon, where there was plenty of water and grass, he started off alone on a scout.

He was gone for a day and night, and Captain Burr was becoming most anxious regarding his safety, when suddenly he appeared in camp.

"Well, Cody!" said the officer, rejoiced at his return.

"I found the village, sir."

"How far from here?"

"Twenty miles, about."

"Where?"

"Hidden away in the mountains."

"You are sure it is the village of Black Face?"

"Yes, sir, I found that out very easily."

"How?"

"I captured one of his braves."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, sir."

"And where is he?"

"Got away."

"An Indian get away from you, Bill?"

"Yes, sir."

"That was unfortunate indeed; but how did it happen?"

"We had been talking together, sir, and he suddenly jumped upon me, and I had to shoot him."

"Oh! that is the way he escaped, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"I see; but you learned all you wanted to know from him first?"

"I caught him with a lariat, captain, while he was following my trail."

"That was good."

"I talk good Injun, as you know, sir, so soon found out that he did not know Kiowa Carl by sight, and led him to believe I was that individual, and found out from him that Black Face was still on the war-path, and intended striking some settlements upon the Elkhorn before he came back."

"Just then he saw this pin on my hat, compared it with the buffalo engraved on my rifle, and tumbled to the racket who I was, for his tribe know me pretty well by name."

"He jumped upon me like a panther, and here is his scalp."

"Served him right; but you found the whereabouts of his village, you say?"

"Yes, sir, for I just took his toggery, struck his trail back to camp, and when dark came, sailed into the village as large as life."

"Bill, you are too reckless."

"Oh, they didn't expect a foe, so I passed muster well, by dodging the braves and squaws, and after counting the tepees, and finding out the best way to strike the lay-out, I skipped away and here I am."

"You are always lucky, Bill; but how many warriors are there in the village?"

"About three hundred, all told, but many of them are old and used up, and we can hit the camp hard."

"And we'll do it."

"Yes, sir, to-night."

Under the guidance of Buffalo Bill the troopers did "hit the camp hard," and after burning the tepees, destroying the supplies, and killing and wounding many, the successful soldiers started upon their return.

It was from this victorious raid that Buffalo Bill had just returned, when the reader finds him in his quarters, reading the letters which had accumulated during his absence.

As some of those letters are of interest in the thread of this story, the reader shall know their contents.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A BATCH OF LETTERS.

THE first letter which Buffalo Bill picked up from among the pile of a dozen that awaited him, was in the well-known handwriting of Dolan, the hotel landlord at Omaha, who gave him a little news regarding matters and things transpiring in that very lively city.

After telling him he had the thanks of the community for getting rid of the desperado he had killed, he continued:

"Terror Tom and his other pard have not been seen since, and it is but natural to suppose they have contrived to emigrate toward the land of the setting sun, for I am confident they would not go Eastward."

"So keep your weather-eye open for them, Bill."

"I hope your cripple panned out rich in virtues, and a willingness to prove his appreciation of what you did for him."

"As for that imp of deviltry, Kiowa Carl, he has not been seen in these parts since, or suspected of being here, and some say he is at the head of the Indian troubles, lately occurring on the Missouri, and it would be just like him."

"The general, I learn, drew your reward for killing White Panther, and is keeping it for you, and I hope you will soon be back to spend a little of it in Omaha."

"Take care of yourself, Bill, for men like you are as scarce as honest quartermasters and pious hotel-keepers."

Such was about the tenor of Pat Dolan's letter, and throwing it aside, Buffalo Bill took up another and broke open the envelope.

It was from Texas Jack, and read as follows:

"DEAR PARD:—"

"I write to tell you that I put your cripple through to Sunset Rest, the ranch of your friends, and they treated me as though I were a prince."

"The cripple proved himself a boss rider, a jolly good story-teller, sung a song as sweetly as a woman, and I was sorry to part company with him."

"But the Markhams took to him as kindly as a kitten does to milk, and he's in clover, and I wouldn't mind having his place, for Miss Markham is as lovely as old Doolittle is ugly."

"I prefer handling a revolver to a pen, as you know, so excuse my short letter, and believe me, Bill,

"Your Pard on Mountain and Plain,"

"JACK."

After reading this characteristic letter from his Prairie Pard, Buffalo Bill took up another, the handwriting of which he recognized as that of Wild Bill.

It was dated from the fort where he was on duty, and ran:

"PARD BILL:—"

"I am happy to be at last able to write you a line to tell you that I accomplished the by no means unpleasant task you set for me, and guided Mr. Markham and his layout in safety to their new home."

"We reached there without the drawing of a drop of blood, or the loss of a hoof or wheel, so I was glad to be able to serve your friends as well almost as you could have done yourself, and am at your disposal for any other favors you may ask, especially where it is playing the agreeable to as beautiful a girl as is Miss Markham."

"And Bill, if ever the red-skins harm one hair of that girl's head, I'll take the death-trail against them for the rest of my life, and don't you forget it."

"The old girl is a daisy, in her way, only I never did like daisies."

"I am not overrun with vanity, as you know, but I do think Miss Doolittle made a dead set at me, until I told her that I frequently killed people in my sleep, thinking they were Injuns, and then she wilted."

"Jack came in with your crooked man just before I left, and with the old maid, the niggers, the cripple, and that unsalted youth, Pepper, if Miss Markham don't have her hands full, I'm sadly mistaken."

"When you come this way be sure and see me, for life's too uncertain, Bill, for us to miss grasping hands when we can."

Yours,

"WILD BILL."

Several other letters were then perused by Buffalo Bill, but, as they have no connection with this story, I will not worry the reader with their contents, and take the next in order, which was written in a bold, large hand, wholly unfamiliar to him to whom it was addressed.

It read:

"SUNSET REST RANCH."

"MY DEAR MR. CODY:—"

"Will you permit me, whom you have well served, to recall himself to your mind, by writing a few lines to thank you for your great kindness to me, and to say that your letter to Mr. Markham gained for me a home in his delightful household, where I hope to remain."

"Mr. Markham thinks of writing you, he says, to invite you to spend some time here, if you can get leave, and I sincerely hope that you will do so, for I long to tell you in person how happy I am, and how much I thank you. With respect,

"Your faithful friend,

"CRIPPLE KIT."

Another was also addressed in an unknown hand, and upon being opened, proved to be from Mr. Markham himself.

It urged Buffalo Bill to pay them a visit, and thanked him for all he had done for himself and family.

"I need a little rest, and, as soon as I can be spared, I will go for a week or two," said Buffalo Bill when he had finished reading this very kind invitation from Mr. Markham, and in which he said his daughter and Miss Doolittle most heartily joined with him.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE SECRET OF A BELT.

BUFFALO BILL having made up his mind to visit his new-found friends, sat some time in deep meditation, but suddenly sprung to his feet, with an exclamation as though he had forgotten the performance of some important duty.

"By the Rockies! but I have not thought of the belt since I put it here on my return after the death of White Panther."

"But I guess it's not important," and, so saying, Buffalo Bill went to his trunk, unlocked it, and took out a worn, and heavily-made belt.

It was the one which he had taken from the waist of Salt Lake Saul, at the request of that unfortunate renegade.

It was divided into four compartments, all of which seemed to be full.

The first he opened, and in it found a lady's watch and chain, a diamond ring, a wedding ring, and a miniature with two likenesses.

The watch had neatly engraven on its inner gold lid the face of a watch, with hours and hands, the latter pointing to eight o'clock, and beneath it the words:

"Married, May 1st, 18—, at eight o'clock, by Rev. Cruse Crane, Daisy Dunstan and Saul Guernsey."

In the plain gold ring was simply the date on the watch, and the names Daisy and Saul.

The miniatures were of a handsome man of twenty-eight, and a maiden of eighteen, with a face of innocent loveliness.

It seemed to Buffalo Bill, as he looked at both faces, that he had seen them before, and after awhile he cried out:

"Yes, it is Saul! I saw Saul, as he was twenty years ago, for I saw the same expression on his face after he died as rests here now."

"But where have I seen her face before?"

This question he was unable to answer, although he gazed long and earnestly upon the lovely face.

Putting the trinkets back in the pocket in the belt, he took out of the next space a quantity of gold, all in twenty-dollar pieces, and amounting to just one thousand dollars.

There was not one of them of an issue within the last ten years, and, observing this circumstance, Buffalo Bill said:

"I guess this was his reserve fund, and it has not been touched for years."

The next pocket revealed a roll of bank notes, aggregating several hundred dollars in amount, and the fourth and last contained what appeared to be old letters.

The first of these which the scout looked at, proved to be a letter addressed:

"MARCUS MANLY, Esq.,

"50 SOUTH FRONT ST.,

"Chicago, Illinois."

Drawing off the envelope the scout found a smaller one within, addressed as follows:

"SAUL GUERNSEY,

"Chicago, Ill."

Both were in the same feminine hand, beautifully written, and the date on them was two years after that in the watch and ring.

Opening the second letter, Buffalo Bill read:

"November 10th, 18—"

"SAUL:—"

"This is the last letter which I shall ever write you, for you have divided our paths in life forever by your crime, for you, not I, am guilty."

"To prove that such is the case read what I have to say, and let the papers tell you that I speak the truth."

"Your upbraiding letter I will not notice, other than to write to you through the address you give under cover of Marcus Manly, and any other communication I receive from you will be returned unread openly to your name, so beware that such a letter going through the mails does not put the officers of the law upon your track."

"I loved you, Saul, more than all else in the world, and so loving you, I could do no wrong, and you should have trusted me."

"You promised, when you were called away to Boston, that you would do all in your power to return in time for the mask ball, and I fondly expected you, for I had a surprise for you, and an unexpected pleasure."

"I waited for you until the last moment, when your telegram came, saying that you could not get back in time, and asking me not to go alone to the ball."

"That morning your sister Grace arrived, and with her Sanford King, to whom she is engaged, but whom you were always jealous of as an old beau of mine."

"I begged them to remain all night in the city and attend the ball, and I dressed Grace up in the beautiful Circassian costume which you had made for me to wear, while I wore my canary silk."

"Grace is just my size and the costume fitted her to perfection, and Sanford I gave to wear your militia uniform."

"Contrary to your telegram you did come, and found me gone, all I had left to the ball with a gentleman, and you waited to hear no more."

"You sought out my costume, found me, as you believed, in the garden, with the arms of a man around my waist, and saw him raise the mask and kiss me, as you supposed."

"He drew aside his mask and you recognized Sanford King, in your uniform, and, mad with jealous rage, you shot him down and died."

"You were recognized, yet escaped, and to-day I received your letter."

"But I will not betray you, for I do not wish to see you hang, Saul, for it is punishment enough for you to feel that Sanford King is dead by your hand, and

that your sister you so fondly loved is the inmate of a lunatic asylum, and the physicians say she can never recover her reason, so you have a double crime to answer for, if not a third, for my heart, Saul, is nearly broken, and only our little child prevents me from ending my wretched existence by my own hand.

"As you direct, I send you by express, to 'Marcus Manly,' my engagement-ring, wedding-ring, and the watch and chain and miniature, your bridal gifts, and may you often look at my face and feel how deeply you have wronged."

"Your broken-hearted wife,

"DAISY."

After reading this letter, Buffalo Bill found several others, addressed in the hand of Saul Guernsey to his wife, and returned unopened, for the seal remained unbroken, and in her handwriting they were redirected to Marcus Manly, the name which the fugitive had assumed.

Then there was in the writing of the dead renegade the following confession, bearing no date, but evidently having been written years before.

It read:

"MY CONFESSION AND WILL.

"I, Saul Guernsey, formerly of Baltimore, Maryland, realizing the uncertainty of the life I lead, as a renegade and bandit, do hereby make my will, leaving all my worldly possessions in the State of Maryland, to my much-wronged and still dearly loved wife, Daisy, and to be bequeathed by her to our child Grace.

"And I implore the one who finds this paper upon my dead body to deliver it to the proper persons, along with my belt of money and trinkets, that they may reach in safety my wife, or child.

"This I ask, as they hope for life beyond the grave.

"SAUL GUERNSEY,

"Renegade and Bandit on the Nebraska Plains."

"Well, this is a pretty piece of business," said Buffalo Bill.

"But, I pledged myself to do as the man asked, and I will keep my word and at once write to this address—

"MRS. SAUL GUERNSEY,

"No. — EUTAW ST.,

"Baltimore, Md."

Half an hour after the letter was written by the scout, and thrown into the mail-bag at the fort.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE COURIER'S LAST RIDE.

It was some weeks before Buffalo Bill started upon his visit to Sunset Rest, and he was riding leisurely along one afternoon, mounted upon his matchless white horse, and keeping in the shadow of the timber that grew upon the hill land near the river banks.

Little did he dream that ahead of him, on the same trail he followed, and only half a mile distant, a tragedy was being enacted, that his good arm might have averted, had he been only a little nearer the scene.

A horseman, a courier, whose duty carried him from fort to fort with the mails, was dashing along at a swift gallop, his horse covered with foam and evidently feeling the hard run his rider had forced him to.

Suddenly, out of thicket came a puff of smoke and a sharp report, and the courier reeled in his saddle, clutched wildly at the air, and fell heavily to the ground, while his horse, at first startled by the shot, soon stopped short, and went to browsing the grass near by.

Then out of the thicket bounded a man's form, and bending over the gasping courier, breathing his last on earth, he severed the strap that bound the mail satchels around his waist, and cutting them open, hastily poured into a bag the contents.

Then, driving his knife deep into the heart of the dying man, to make sure of his work, he bounded back toward his covert and disappeared.

A groan or two, a gurgling in the throat, and the courier was dead, and silence rested upon the scene, excepting the sound made by the horse in cropping grass.

Thus passed a few minutes, and then Buffalo Bill came upon the scene.

His quick eye first fell upon the horse, and then upon the body of the courier.

Drawing a revolver, to be ready for any work he might be called upon to do, he spurred forward to the spot and sprung from his saddle.

"Dead!"

The word broke from his lips as he raised the pulseless wrist and felt it.

"Yet warm, and that shows the murder has just been done.

"This is no Indian's work, for his scalp remains.

"And I never heard of road-agents just here.

"It is the mail-courier between Kearney and Fort Sedgwick, and, poor fellow, he has ridden his last trail.

"Shot first, then knifed, to make sure of the work, and his mail-bag cut and the contents gone.

"Now to see who has done this," and Buffalo Bill read the signs about him with wonderful truthfulness of the facts.

"First, I'll bury him, and that duty done I may be able to perform a like office for the man who killed him."

The task was no easy one, with only a bowie-knife and tin cup to serve as spade and shovel; but a grave was dug, and the body placed in it.

Then Buffalo Bill went straight to the thicket, from whence the shot had been fired.

"Yes, he was lying in wait here and he fired with his revolver, and therefore must be a dead shot.

"Here are his tracks, and I'll see which way the trail leads."

It led by a circuit to the river, and there entered, and all trace was lost.

Giving up the pursuit, as he felt that he must go on and report the affair, Buffalo Bill went back and caught the horse, and then continued on his way.

A ride of several miles brought him to a spot where the trail branched off in two directions, one going to Fort Sedgwick, and the other on up the Platte.

There was timber there, and often the spot had been used as a camping-ground.

Now, as he approached, Buffalo Bill saw that there was some one in the timber, and he knew that it would be prudent to go slow and reconnoiter, for, should it be an enemy, the shelter of the trees gave him the advantage over one coming from the open prairie.

"It may be the murderer of the courier looking for another job, so I'll not play into his hand," he muttered, and halting, he closely examined the timber.

But just then he heard a hail, and then his name was called in familiar, ringing tones, and a man came out of the timber and advanced toward him.

"Cripple Kit, as I live!"

"Yes, Mr. Cody, it is the man who owes to you more than he can repay; the poor cripple whom you have saved from self-destruction," and limping forward in a seemingly painful manner, Cripple Kit grasped the hand of his friend and wrung it warmly.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

TAKING THE TRAIL.

"Kit, what in the name of goodness brings you in this out-of-the-way place?" asked Buffalo Bill, after he had shaken hands with the cripple.

"Oh, I come here once every week, to meet the mail courier, and get Mr. Markham's letters and papers."

"And you meet him here when he turns off to Sedgwick?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you are waiting for him now?"

"I am."

"Well, Kit, you will wait in vain."

"What do you mean, Mr. Cody?"

"Do you see this horse?"

"Yes."

"Do you know him?"

Kit gazed searchingly at the led horse, with its military saddle and bridle, and answered:

"It looks like the sorrel Benedict the courier rode sometimes."

"You are right; it is his horse."

"And the courier?"

"I buried him an hour ago, Kit."

"Dead?" gasped Kit.

"Yes; or I should not have buried him, Kit."

"Who killed him?"

"That is hard to find out."

"I found him lying dead in the road, and buried him."

"This is his horse, and there on the saddle are the paper bags."

"I followed the trail to the Platte, and there lost it, for he may have crossed, and he may have swum and waded down the stream, and come out on the same side again."

"His horse would get in the quicksands then."

"He was on foot, Kit, and wore heavy boots, for I noted the track well."

"But I must go on to Sedgwick, and make my report, and I want you to tell Mr. Markham I was on my way to see him, and hope to soon be able to get there, but for the next few days I will try and run down the murderer of the courier."

"I will tell him, sir, and we will all be delighted to have you come, for we often speak of you."

"Then you like it there?"

"Indeed I do, sir; and they treat me most kindly; but I am such a cripple I cannot do all I would wish to."

"Never mind, Kit, for you are very industrious, I know, and do all you can."

"I hope Mr. Markham did not expect any important letters by this mail; for, if so, they are lost, unless we can catch that murderer."

"But, good-by, and remember me to all."

"I will, sir," and Cripple Kit mounted his horse, hitched in the timber, and rode back toward Sunset Rest, while Buffalo Bill continued on the trail to Fort Sedgwick.

It was after nightfall when Cripple Kit reached the ranch, and he found Mr. Markham and all most anxious about him, for he was several hours late.

But he explained his delay by saying he had waited for the poor courier, and that he had

met Buffalo Bill, whose intended visit had been interrupted by the tragedy on the trail.

All were horrified to learn of the death of the unfortunate courier, and delighted to know that they might soon expect a visit from Buffalo Bill, and regretted that it had been delayed as it had.

"I will take several of the boys at daybreak to-morrow, and try and discover some trace of that assassin," said Mr. Markham, and Pepper was called and sent up to the cowboy cabin to tell Platte Paul to come by the house at dawn with four of his men.

"And I can go, too, can I not, father?" asked Madge, ever willing for a jaunt on the prairie.

"It is a long ride, there and back, Madge."

"I don't mind it, sir."

"Very well; you can go."

"And can I, sir?"

"Yes, Kit; and see that the Yellow Chief is ready for Miss Madge, and Satan's Pet for me," the latter being the name Madge had given the horse of Kiowa Carl, which Buffalo Bill had left with the train.

The next morning after a breakfast eaten by candle-light, the party of five cowboys, Mr. Markham, Madge and Kit, rode off on the trail to the scene of murder, even Madge being armed.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A CRY FOR HELP.

UNDER the guidance of Cripple Kit the party rode rapidly along until they came to where the trail divided.

"Here is where Mr. Cody met me, and told me the courier was murdered," said Kit.

"Did he say how far back on the trail?" asked Mr. Markham.

"Several miles, I think he said."

The party again moved on, and before very long came upon the scene of the murder, which was marked by a red spot upon the ground where the courier had fallen.

Not far off, under a tree, was the new-made grave, and thither Madge went, saying she would rest there, while the others followed the trail of the assassin.

There were two different footprints, one evidently made by the small feet of Buffalo Bill, and the other by some one wearing a large, heavy boot.

"That's his mark," said Kit, and they followed to the thicket, saw where he had evidently waited some time for his victim to come along, and then discovered that it led back into the thicker timber on the hills.

The cowboys were all good trailers, and it did not take them long, with the trace which Buffalo Bill had left with his high-heeled boots, to track the fugitive for nearly a mile, where it broke off at the river-bank.

They saw that there the scout had halted, and gone back after his horse, and the question arose as to whether they must give it up, too.

"Butler Bill bain't ther boy ter drop a trail, unless it are necessary, cap'n, an' as he hes dropped this one right heur, my idee are thet he hev gonod ter ther fort, ter carry ther news, an' will soon be back ter take up ther thread o' his work jest whar he left it off," said Platte Paul.

"So I think, and we may be able to give him some aid," answered Mr. Markham, whom all the cowboys had christened cap'n, a title that greatly amused Madge, and pleased Miss Doolittle so much that she had adopted it, too.

"Waal, what hes yer ter say, cap'n?"

"Just this, Paul:

"The murderer either crossed the river here, or kept on down it, or up it, for some distance, and then landed on one side or the other."

"Fact."

"Well, if he crossed, his trail will be there."

"Sure."

"If he took to the water, to go up or down the stream, he was compelled to land somewhere."

"Thet are Gospel."

"Then two of you go across the river, and one go up and the other down, for, say a couple o' miles."

"Right you is, cap'n."

"Two more take the same plan on this side of the river, and you, Paul, Kit and myself will make a more careful search about here, and the spot where the murder was committed, until you boys come back, which should be in two or three hours, and they can join us at the grave."

"Cap'n, yer is full o' wisdom, an' knows how ter plot prairie-work same as tho' yer hed been riz on bufler milk when yer were a baby, an' hed a Injun skull full o' beads fer a rattle."

Mr. Markham smiled at the compliment paid him by Platte Paul, and the four cowboys at once started upon their mission, two of them crossing the river, at the point where the murderer had entered the water, and the other two going up and down the stream on the side where they were.

"I'll lead the horses back, sir, while you and Platte Paul look around," said Kit, and he walked off, leading the batch of horses back to

the grave, which was the rendezvous for the meeting of all.

He had been gone but twenty minutes, when Mr. Markham and Platte Paul, who were slowly retracing the trail, to see if any item of importance had escaped their eyes regarding it, heard a loud, piercing cry for help, followed by two shots in the distance.

Well they knew the voice that called for help, and like deer they bounded through the timber in the direction of the cry.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE CRY ANSWERED.

WHEN Madge was left alone, at the grave of the murdered mail-courier, not one of the party realized that there was any danger in leaving her unprotected.

That part of the country had of late been free from Indian raids and road-agent attacks, and the maiden felt no anxiety regarding herself.

For a long time she stood gazing down upon the new-made mound, thinking of the sad fate the poor courier had met with, and the desolation and sorrow that would fall upon those who loved him, through his untimely end.

Going up into the canyon, she plucked a few wild flowers, and brought them back to place upon the lonely mound, as a tribute of her sympathy for those who could not have the same sorrowful pleasure, and then she stood gazing out upon the scenespread before her, and drinking in its beauty.

At last, as no sound came to her ears, a feeling of loneliness came over her, and she determined to mount her horse, and see if she could not find the trailers.

She was a splendid horsewoman, and placing her hands upon the saddle leaped to her seat with perfect ease.

But, hardly were the reins in her hand, when there came a whirring sound, and a lariat settled down over the head of Yellow Chief.

The frightened animal gave a bound that nearly threw Madge from the saddle, but the tightening of the lariat reined him back upon his haunches, with a force which almost dragged him off his feet.

In spite of her alarm Madge did not lose her presence of mind, but drawing the small knife she wore in the belt around her waist, she leant forward to sever the lariat that held the noble animal.

But, ere she could do so, there came a clatter of hoofs, and up to each side of her dashed a horseman.

Dropping her knife, she sought to draw her revolver, but her arm was seized with a grip that made her cry out with pain, while a rude voice said:

"That's yer game, are it, gal? Waal, we'll see yer don't git hold o' that toy."

One glance into the faces of the two horsemen was enough to show her that she was in the power of men in human form, but with the cruelty of beasts, and recognizing her utter helplessness, for she saw now that a third held the other end of the lariat, she cried in startled, ringing tones:

"Help! help! father! Kit! save me!"

Instantly a rough hand was thrust over her mouth, and a voice hissed in her ears:

"Shet up, or I'll knife yer, gal."

"Come, Ned, let's git out o' this while we hes time," cried the second horseman.

"Yer is dead-sure right, Mike, we'll go."

"Come on, Ike, fer we hes ter git, an' git lively, or we'll lose what we hes got, an' then whar is our dust?"

The two men wheeled their steeds, with Yellow Chief between them, and the third, the one who had thrown the lariat so skillfully, came out of the thicket leading his horse.

Held firmly in her saddle by a hand of the ruffians on each of her arms, and Yellow Chief secured by the lariat, Madge felt that she was utterly helpless, and the threat of one of her assailants had effectually silenced her, for he looked as though he would keep his word in any act of deviltry, but break it under circumstances where to keep it would be to perform a good action.

Her cry she hoped had been heard, and if so, she knew that her father and all would follow hot on her trail, and therefore she did not give up all hope, nor lose her presence of mind.

But hardly had the three horses moved three lengths together, when suddenly there came a distant report of a rifle, and a thud, almost together, followed instantly by a second shot and the same dull thud, while a cry broke from the lips of one of her foes, and to her surprise the other hung over upon the neck of his horse, his hand having let go its hold upon her arm.

"Good God! gal, I am hit and hurted bad," cried the second man, and Madge saw by his face livid as death that he spoke the truth, and instantly she reined Yellow Chief back.

But the lariat around his neck was lashed securely to the horn of each of the ruffians' saddles, and she could not free herself, for one of the men lay over upon the neck of his horse, and the other was writhing in agony, his hands pressed upon his side.

Then Madge saw that in the back of the wounded man was a red spot, growing larger

and redder, and she knew that there somebody's bullet had entered, while from the other's head a crimson stream was dripping.

It was a terrible sight for the young girl, and she needed all her nerve and self-control not to fall in a faint to the ground, for the man on her right she knew was dead, and the groans of the other filled her with horror.

"Ike! Ned! what in thunder's up?" cried the third villain, now dashing forward on his horse.

"Hold, sirl these men have fallen beneath the fire of my friends, and you will share their fate!" cried Madge, sternly.

The man cast one look at his dead and wounded comrades, and cried:

"I'm durned ef I do."

In an instant he had wheeled his horse and was gone like the wind, unheeding the cries of his companion, who shrieked, imploringly:

"Don't leave me, Andy! help me, for I'm hard hit! oh! so hard hit!"

As though he had no longer strength to hold himself in his saddle, he reeled, swayed to and fro, clutched at the air, and dropped to the ground heavily, and there lay moaning in anguish.

Fortunately for Madge, the three horses made no effort to dash away, or she would have been utterly powerless to check them, and wholly at their mercy, for she had barely strength to keep Yellow Chief quiet.

But from whence had come those two shots? Who had been the one who had so quickly, and well, answered her appealing cry for help?

These questions the poor girl could not answer, and looking almost timidly around her she saw no one in sight.

The shots had come from afar off, from the sound, both had been well aimed, one of her assailants was dead, a second evidently dying, and the third had fled.

She was safe! and that much she knew, but no more.

Who, then, had answered her cry for help?

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE RESCUER.

It was an awful moment, fraught with dread, suppressed excitement, for poor Madge, as she sat upon her horse waiting, and each moment seeming an age.

Suddenly she heard the rapid fall of hoofs, and down a hillside, a hundred yards away, dashed a steed, a rider in the saddle.

The rider carried in his hands a rifle, and was urging his horse forward with gigantic bounds.

One look upon the snow-white animal and she knew him.

One glance at the tall, handsome rider, with his long hair floating out behind him in the wind, and she cried, in glad accents:

"Buffalo Bill! I am saved, thank God!"

On came the noble white with terrific bounds, and the next instant he was reined back, almost at the side of Madge, while Buffalo Bill raised his sombrero, and said, hastily:

"I am glad to see you, Miss Markham; but are you alone?"

"No, sir; or, that is, my father and others are not far away."

"You, then, are my gallant rescuer—"

"Ah! there they come, now, so pardon me if I hasten on after that third rascal whom I saw dash away, and whose trail is there."

Madge would have detained him, and said let the third man go; but he was off like a rocket, hard on the track of the third assailant of the maiden, and after watching him for an instant, she turned toward her father, Kit and Platte Paul, who just then came up, the latter leading the horses of the men.

"My child! what has happened! Great God! what does all this mean?" gasped Mr. Markham, as he took Madge from her saddle and supported her in his arms.

But now that the danger was over, she burst into tears and could utter no word.

"It looks as tho' thar had been a picnic fer somebody heur, an' ef I c'd hev see'd who it were on that white horse, I'd know his name, I gueses," said Platte Paul.

"This one is dead, and this one—" and Kit hesitated as he bent over the second man, and then added: "Is about in the same condition."

"But who are they, and what does it all mean?"

"Can you not speak now, my daughter, to tell what you have suffered?" pleaded the alarmed father.

With an effort at self control Madge dried her tears and said, at first, in tremulous tones, and then with firmness as she went on:

"I have only to say, father, that as I sat here on Chief, a lariat was thrown over his head from a man in yonder thicket, and two more on horseback dashed out from behind that hill and seized me."

"I called for aid but was rudely stopped, and threatened if I did so again, and just then I heard two distant shots and two dull thuds, and to my horror, saw that man fall over motionless upon the neck of his horse, while the other cried out in agony, and I discovered that he had been shot in the back."

"He soon after fell from his saddle, and the third man mounted his horse and fled."

"But who fired those shots?"

"Buffalo Bill; for he dashed up a moment ago, and is now after my third assailant."

"Buffalo Bill! Hooray! He are a whole team and a horse ter let."

"Gone arter ther third galoot yer say, miss?" shouted Platte Paul.

"Yes."

"Waal, we'll jist take it cool an' await his return with his scalp, fer he's got it, sure."

"But I thort yer said, Cripple Kit, Bufler hed gone on ter Sedgwick?"

"And so I believed, for he told me he was going there."

"Waal, it are lucky he didn't go; but who in thunder is these pilgrims that is tryin' ter run off with a leddy on ther free pararer?"

"Let me see if this heur one hes got health enough in him ter answer a question."

"I say, pard?"

But the dying man only groaned in answer to Platte Paul.

"Whar hurts yer?"

A deeper groan was the only answer.

"Does yer want ter see a parson?"

The man's eyes slowly opened, and Platte Paul continued:

"Jist like yer sinners; yer raises blazes thro' life, an' when yer comes ter die wants ter shoulder all yer sins upon a poor parson, who hes enough o' his own ter answer fer, ef he are paid fer runnin' Satan down."

"Speak up, man, an' tell us who yer be, an' ef yer don't deserve what yer got?"

The glassy eyes only stared at the questioner, and the lips slightly moved.

"He's a goner, cap'n, an' can't talk."

"Well, let him die in peace," answered Mr. Markham.

"I hain't goin' ter distarb him, an' ter save time, I guess I'll sot ter work ter scratch a hole fer him an' his pard, fer t'other one are waitin' fer it now."

"Come, Kit, an' let's set to diggin'."

While turned away with a shoveller, to see Platte Paul digging a grave for a man who yet had life in him, and who and her father were walking off a little distance, when two shots were heard, and then another.

Platte Paul was upon his feet in an instant.

"It are Bufler, an' he hev t'reed ther galoot."

"And may be killed. Oh, go to his aid, please," cried Madge.

But Platte Paul took it very coolly and answered:

"Ef he are dead, miss, hurryin' hain't no use."

"Somebody are dead, that are a fact, fer whar Bufler Bill are, thar hain't three shots fired an' nobody hurted, or hev ther checks cut in."

"Besides, Bufler Bill wouldn't thank me ter help him out o' a scrape with one man."

"But he is mortal."

"I spect so, miss, an' as soon as I gits this grave dug, ef he hain't come in with a scalp, I'll go an' see ef thar be anybody needin' buryin' over thar."

"Then I shall go—come, father."

She sprang nimbly into her saddle as she spoke, and her father mounted and followed her in the direction from whence the shots had come.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE DEVIL'S HALF-DOZEN.

A SHARP gallop of half a mile and Mr. Markham and Madge drew rein, for the former saw that both Platte Paul and Cripple Kit had mounted their horses and followed them, for though the cowboy felt that Buffalo Bill was fully able to take care of himself, he had a very different opinion regarding his employer and his daughter, and, if they ran into danger, he determined to be on hand to aid them.

"Come, Cripple, a gal allus hes her way, so we must go with 'em, fer tho' thar were but one man seen, fer Bufler Bill ter go arter, thar mou't hev been more," said Platte Paul, and at once they left off their grave-digging and went in chase of the others.

"Why do you not come on, father?" urged Madge, as her father drew rein.

"Because, my child, I see that Platte Paul is following us, and if he did not dread we might be in danger, he would not have come."

"But Mr. Cody is ahead of us, and there was only one man he pursued."

"True, yet that one man may have ambushed even Cody, and there may be others, whom you did not see, and I do not care to have your life endangered again to-day."

"Wait for Paul, and I'll ride on ahead with him, while you remain here with Kit."

"No, if you go, I go."

And Madge was so firm in her resolve that Platte Paul said:

"Better gi'n in, cap'n, fer when a gal's set her mind on goin', she are goin', or break a trace."

Madge laughed, and the four rode forward once more.

Soon they once more drew rein, for they came upon a scene suddenly, which caused them to halt involuntarily.

Some distance away, in a lonely spot, just on the bank of the river, crouched a man.

His arms were moving steadily, and by his side was a pile of new earth.

Upon the other side was a human form, lying out motionless, the face turned upward, and it needed no words, or closer look, to know that he was dead.

"Didn't I tell yer so?" said Paul Platte.

No one answered him, and he continued:

"Yer see thet pictur', an' it are a putty one to my mind's eye.

"Thar are ther hillside, green an' slopin', an' ther tree, an' beneath it a man diggin' a grave inter which he are ter place ther stiff lyin' alongside.

"Killin' his man, an' then buryin' him, are ther sign o' a man o' nerve.

"Now jist let me show yer how I kin change ther pictur'—whoop!"

The yell uttered by Platte Paul did change the scene, for at once the digger sprang to his feet, his rifle in hand, and faced toward the sound.

"Hil hal! Bufler, yer is as quick on ther jump as a jack-rabbit.

"But is yer makin' a bone orchid?" called out Platte Paul.

Buffalo Bill raised his hat, in a courtly manner natural to him, and answered:

"I am building a grave, Paul, for a man I jist had to kill.

"How are you, Mr. Markham? And Miss Markham, I hope you'll excuse my sudden departure a while ago," and Buffalo Bill advanced and shook hands with the father and daughter, while the latter said in a voice that slightly trembled:

"Mr. Cody, I owe you my life."

"No, no, Miss Markham, only your liberty, for those fellows could not have held you long, as Paul here would have soon run them down.

"But I am glad I was able to serve you, and I took big chances in making the shots, for I was a long way off, and they were so close to you."

"But Kit told us you had gone on to Sedgwick, for we heard from him the fate of the courier," said Mr. Markham.

"I did start for Sedgwick, sir, but met a scouting party from there and turned the courier's horse over to them, while I came back to follow up this trail while it was fresh, and as affairs have turned out I am glad that I did."

"Have you made any discovery, pard Bill?"

"No, Paul, for I had just gotten back in the neighborhood, when I suddenly saw Miss Markham, and while looking at her, in surprise at seeing her here, I beheld three fellows dash out upon her."

"Ah, Mr. Cody, we are getting sadly in your debt, I fear," said Mr. Markham.

"Don't speak of it, sir; but have you any of your men with you, Platte Paul?"

"Yes," and he explained where they were.

"Well, they may bring tidings, so let us get this poor wretch under ground."

"Does yer know him, Bill?"

"Yes."

"Who are he?"

"His name is Arizona Andy."

"O-o! An' you know'd t'other two?"

"Yes."

"Waal?"

"They were Nebraska Ned and Iowa Ike."

"Oho! I sees, I sees."

"What do you see, Paul?" asked Mr. Markham.

"Ask Bill, can'n."

"Well, Cody?"

"They are three of a gang known as the Devil's Half-Dozen, from the fact that they are always in deviltry, and doubtless attempted the capture of Miss Markham, to force you to pay a large ransom for her return."

"Waal, yer hes cut 'em down half, Bill; but heur comes ther boys."

The four cowboys now came dashing up, and looked surprised, for they had seen the two dead men back by the courier's grave, and now beheld another and Buffalo Bill.

They soon learned what had happened, and then made known that they had searched the river on both sides thoroughly, for a mile or more, up and down stream, but could find no trail.

"Well, we'll give it up for the present."

"And you'll go home with us, Cody?"

"To-night, yes, thank you, sir; but then I must return to Sedgwick, for, though on furlough for a while, I promised the officer I met to-day to come to the fort and ride mail courier for a few trips."

The dead outlaws were then buried, and the whole party started on the trail back to Sunset Rest, where Miss Doolittle nearly went into a faint at hearing what had happened, but rallied quickly, when she saw that Buffalo Bill did not spring forward to catch her.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

BLOOD THICKER THAN WATER.

SOME days passed away after the scenes related in the foregoing chapter, and Sunset Rest household had again settled down to the even tenor of its way.

Buffalo Bill had passed a night in the hospitable home, and had then gone to Fort Sedgwick to take voluntarily the place of the dead mail courier, and both Mr. Markham and Madge understood well that he had a motive in so doing, which was no more nor less than trying to discover the murderer of the unfortunate man.

One day Kit took his usual weekly ride to the point where he met the courier, and found Buffalo Bill there promptly on time.

"Well, Kit, all well at the Rest?" called out the scout.

"Yes, sir."

"No news?"

"None, sir. Have you any?"

"No, I have seen nothing larger than a jack-rabbit the whole ride out, until I met you."

"It is strange you have been unable to find out anything about the murderer of the poor courier, sir."

"It is strange, Kit; but I don't give up a trail because it is not marked out for me, and I live in hopes."

"And I hope you will be successful."

"Are there any letters, sir?"

"Yes, and one very important one, from a lawyer in Omaha, which Mr. Markham must receive at once."

"He says that he wrote before, but received no answer, so sent this one through with particular instructions to the couriers to have it delivered."

"I will be most careful of it, sir."

"I know that, Kit."

"Here it is, and there are a few others and the papers."

"Good-by, and tell Mr. Markham I hope to make my visit before long."

"I will, sir. Good-by," and Kit waved his hand, as Buffalo Bill dashed on and disappeared down the trail.

Then he started on his way back to the ranch, and, being well mounted, rapidly cast the miles behind him.

The family were at supper when he entered, and said:

"Here is an important letter, captain." Kit had adopted the title of the cowboys for Mr. Markham.

"Yes; let me see it."

"Buffalo Bill gave it to me, and said it was sent through with the particular request to couriers to see that it was not lost."

"Indeed! it must be important, and yet I am expecting no formidable correspondence," and Mr. Markham laid the letter by his plate with the rest of the mail.

"Nothing for me, papa?"

"No, Madge."

"Nor for me, captain?"

"No, Miss Doolittle, he has not written you this time."

"There are many he's, Captain Markham, who would be only too glad to write to me if I would allow it."

"I don't doubt it, Miss Doolittle, for you were always a favorite with the men."

"Well, I don't know, as to allowing men to write to me, as I should, and I don't know but what I should; but—"

"So you saw the scout to-day, Kit?" broke in the ranchero with some haste.

"Yes, sir."

"No news?"

"None."

"Has no clew yet to the murderer?"

"No, sir."

"Does he intend taking the place of a courier much longer?"

"He says he will try and find out the murderer before he gives it up."

"And I believe he will," said Madge.

"I don't know as he will, and I don't know but what he will, Madge; but—"

"You'll excuse me, Madge, and Miss Doolittle, as I wish to look over my letters?" said Mr. Markham, rising.

He seated himself in his easy-chair, put on his spectacles, snuffed the candles, and tore open the important letter brought him with such urgent instructions for its safety.

It was dated at Omaha, and he had read but a few lines when he started to his feet and strode to and fro, with head bowed down and pale face.

"Father, is there any sad news?" asked Madge, anxiously, for she had never seen him so deeply moved since her mother died.

"Sad news, yes, Madge, for me, and glad news for you, I suppose," he answered in a voice that quivered.

"Indeed, father! what can it be that can make me glad when you are sad?" she asked in a tone of slight reproach.

"Madge, you know something of my earlier years, and you are a brave, noble girl, so read these letters, for I cannot, as my eyes are too misty to night."

He handed her two letters, one having been inclosed in the other, and threw himself into his easy-chair once more, and shaded his face with his fingers, as though the light was too strong for him.

The maiden took the letters, and opening the sheet of one read aloud, and in a distinct, firm

tone, which showed she was not afraid to read anything she might find there:

"MADGE MARKHAM, Esq.:—"

"MY DEAR SIR:—Some time since I wrote you an important communication which I trust reached you in safety, though I have received no response thereto."

"I now write again, and, in case my former letter should have miscarried, for I know fully the uncertainty of border mails, I beg to make known to you that I have received from Messrs. Tompkins & Iverton, attorneys in London, England, a letter informing me of the death of your elder and only brother, Daniel Markham of Markham Manor, and that he has made your daughter his heiress."

Here Madge paused, her voice choked up, and she looked at her father.

But he remained silent and motionless, his face half-hidden by his hands, and, with an effort the maiden continued the reading of the letter:

"The letter I send within is from your brother to you, and whatever in the past was the cause of any unkind feeling between you, you will see that he let not the sun of his life go down with wrath in his heart to you and yours, but handsomely remembered his niece, as his communication to you will fully explain."

"A copy of the will I have here, and as your brother's letter will tell you all, I need say no more than to say please command me for any service I can render you."

Yours, with respect,

RICHARD EYSTER,

Attorney at Law."

"Is that all, Madge?" asked Mr. Markham, in a low tone.

"Yes, sir—and no, for here is a postscript."

"Read it, for lawyers' postscripts are like a woman's, always the most important part of the letter."

CHAPTER XL.

THE "P. S."

MADGE, before reading aloud the postscript in the letter of the lawyer, glanced at it, and her face slightly flushed, and her foot beat the floor with some degree of impatience.

The "P. S." read:

"I nearly forgot to say, having done so in my former letter, that Captain Eugene Enders, the heir in the will of Mr. Daniel Markham, is now in this country, hunting on our plains, with a party of English friends, and he wrote me to expect him to see me on any day, when he would at once arrange to visit you at your ranch."

"I send within his photograph, and Miss Markham will see that he is by no means an ordinary-looking personage. Yours, R. E."

"But who is this man, Madge, that this lawyer speaks of as heir, and what about him?"

"I know no more than do you, father."

"But perhaps uncle Daniel's letter will explain all."

"Doubtless; so read poor Daniel's letter."

"But there is no photograph in the lawyer's letter."

"You have dropped it out."

Madge made a diligent search, and her father aided her.

But nowhere could the photograph be found.

"He has forgotten it, Madge."

"That is it, sir, I suppose."

"It is of no importance."

But Madge thought it was, and said:

"I would like to have seen it."

"From all accounts we will soon see the original."

"What does the lawyer say his name is, Madge?"

"Captain Eugene Enders."

"Captain?"

"Yes, sir."

"Of what?"

"He does not say."

"He doubtless gets his rank as I do," muttered Mr. Markham, who seemed in a cynical mood, and which was a rare occurrence for him.

"You forget, sir, that he is English."

"Well?"

"Military titles there are not as cheap as in this country."

"That is true; well, he doubtless has bought into the Rifles, or Guards, or some crack Regiment."

"Do you not remember the name?"

"No."

"It is not a family name then, father?"

"Why, Madge, how great an interest you are taking in this unknown man."

"But tell me the name again."

"Eugene Enders."

"But I do recall the name!" said Mr. Markham, quickly.

"Well, father?"

"When I was a little boy, Brother Daniel's life was saved when he was upset in his yacht, one day, by a young girl, who went out in a surf skiff and rescued him."

"A brave act, sir."

"A most gallant act, indeed."

"And he loved her?"

"Don't jump at conclusions, Madge, if you want me to tell you what I know about the name of Enders."

"It is just like women, though, for when interested in a novel, they always turn to the end to see how it turns out, who marries and who dies," and Mr. Markham relapsed into his cynical mood once more.

But Madge laughed and said:

"Don't be cross, papa, but go on with your story."

"Well, this girl was the daughter of a keeper of a light-house, and was our cousin, several degrees removed."

"She was very lovely in face, form and character, and, as Daniel was sick at her cottage for some time, the two fell in love with each other."

"But father stormed, swore he should never marry a girl of her rank in life, forgetting all the time, in his rage, that she was his own kindred, but poor, yet proud as Lucifer, and Daniel gave her up."

"What a coward," said Madge, contemptuously.

"Sh! Madge, he is dead, you know."

"So he did not marry her?"

"No, and she married, years after, a young man whose life she also saved."

"Well, papa."

"Her name was Eugenia Mortlake, and the man she married bore the name of Enders, I remember, and this Captain Eugene Enders may be her son."

"It may be so, sir."

"Now read poor Daniel's letter, please, and it will doubtless tell us all about it."

CHAPTER XLI.

DANIEL MARKHAM'S LETTER.

"Let me see the writing, Madge." Mr. Markham took the letter in his hands, and said in a low tone:

"Yes, it is poor Daniel's handwriting, as I remember it in the long ago, though I have not seen it now for many long years."

"Read it, Madge, for I cannot."

Madge took the letter again and began:

"MARKHAM MANOR, December 31st, 18—.

"MY DEAR BROTHER MABREY:—

"This, the last night of the year, brings vividly to my remembrance the days when we were boys together. Oh! so very long ago."

"It is a bleak, cold night without, and the winds howl dismally about my home, making the brightness within far more bright and cheerful."

"And yet, within my heart, it seems as though it was more in accord with the gloom and turmoil without, for, Mabrey, I am not, and never have been, a happy man."

"One reason is that I loved in early life, and lost, through my own weakness of character, the one woman I ever cared to call by the sacred name of wife."

"I loved gold well then, and I would not risk its loss to gain poor Eugenia Enders, and another won her, and made her his wife."

"Again, Mabrey, in spite of my seeming coldness toward you, I ever loved you dearly in my heart, and when you were gone it gave me sorrow."

"When my father died and left me his heir, and you came to his funeral, my greed for gold made me jealous of you, and I feared you had come to demand of me my share, and bitterly did I repent afterward that I had turned you from my door."

"Forgive me, brother, for I have suffered for the act most deeply."

"The check you left, to put up a monument above the remains of our parents, I expended as you desired, and the marble tomb now stands as a tribute of your remembrance of our father and mother."

"Of late I have felt that very soon I must shuffle off life's mortal coil, for the doctors say I must go within a year or two, and it is but fitting that I make my peace with God and man, and hence I write you, my brother."

"The son of Eugenia Enders I have adopted as my own, for both of his parents are dead."

"His name is Eugene Enders, and he is a captain in the 1st Dragoons, and as noble a man as his mother was a woman."

"Can I say more?"

"Through your check being on the bank here, I secretly ascertained your address in America, and was glad to learn that you were well and happy, and had married a lovely woman."

"Lately I learned that your wife was dead, and you had one child, a daughter, and that she was all that you could wish her to be."

"Through my informant, I also learned that you had met with a few reverses, and had lost considerable of your hard-earned fortune."

"Knowing these things, and loving Eugene as my own son, and Madge, your daughter, for your sake, I have made my will in their favor."

"That is, I leave to them my fortune, in toto, and it is very large, having trebled my inheritance under my good management."

"But I leave in my will a condition."

Here Madge paused, and her beautiful face flushed and paled by turns.

"Read on, Madge, child," said her father, calmly.

Madge resumed with an effort:

"This condition is, that your daughter, Madge Markham, becomes the wife of Eugene Enders."

"The boy pledges me his word that he loves no one in England, and my informant, regarding you and your family, says that Madge has had no affair of the heart, so the game is an equal one between them."

"Should neither love the other, I do not ask them to perjure themselves for the gold I leave them conjointly, and between themselves they can decide upon a division; but it seems to me that I would rest happier in my grave, did I know they were married."

"Eugene goes to America soon, for a hunt on your noted prairies, and he will visit you then."

"Now, brother, with the hope of your forgiveness and forgetfulness of the bygone, believe me

"Your loving brother,

"DANIEL MARKHAM."

"Well, Madge?"

A silence had fallen upon father and daughter with the last word of the letter, and it was some minutes before it was broken by Mr. Markham looking up and saying:

"Well, Madge?"

"Do you think it well, father?"

"To have a fortune, child?"

"With a husband I have never seen?"

"I do not know what to say."

"Nor I, sir."

"You have never loved, have you, Madge?"

She smiled brightly, and answered:

"Not to an extent to hurt me, father."

"Ah! I am glad of it, for, do you know once I almost feared you were interested in that villain."

"Which villain, father, for we have met so many?"

"Kiowa Karl."

"Father!" and her eyes flashed.

"Forgive me, Madge; but I could never understand your setting him free, and I believe he was at the bottom of that attempt to kidnap you."

"A glib tongue worked on my sympathies, father, that was all."

"And no one else has won your little heart, Madge?"

She put her hand playfully over her heart, and listening to its beating, said:

"No, father, it is here yet."

"Well, we shall see, what we shall see," muttered Mr. Markham, while Madge said with tearful eyes:

"It was very kind of uncle Daniel to remember me in his will."

"He had a good heart after all, Madge; but it is getting late, so go to bed, while I write to this lawyer and find out when my brother died, and about when we may expect this gallant captain."

Madge kissed her father good-night, and retired to her room, to long lay awake in deep meditation, while the letter to the lawyer was not written, as Mr. Markham dropped his head upon his hands, and as he sat thus hour after hour, there trooped before him the phantom memories of the past, from boyhood to manhood, from manhood to old age, and, for the first time he felt that he too was approaching the grave.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE HEIR.

THE following afternoon Madge and her father sat upon the piazza of the cabin, gazing out upon the river, and thinking, rather than talking.

Suddenly a horseman dashed up and dismounting threw his bridle rein over a hitching-post.

"Is it Kit?" asked Mr. Markham, whose eyes were beginning to fail him a little.

"No, father, it is a stranger."

"I thought Kit could not possibly get back before night, and he may have to wait some time for Cody to pass, so as to give him the letter; but who is it, child?"

"I do not know, father."

"None of our neighbors?" and neighbors in that prairie-land then meant several rancheros who lived from twenty to forty miles distant.

"No, sir."

"A cowboy?"

"It is not a cowboy, father, but a man of different appearance."

"Egad! it may be the heir."

So thought Madge, and her face became crimson, as with her father she arose to greet the stranger, who, having hitched his horse, was approaching the piazza.

"Have I the honor of meeting Mr. Mabrey Markham?"

The stranger spoke in a deep, musical voice, and politely raised his hat as he did so.

He was a man six feet in height, straight as an arrow, with broad shoulders, and the dignified carriage of a soldier.

He was dressed in a suit of dark blue, the pants being stuck in a pair of cavalry boots, and beneath his sack coat was visible a belt, which evidently held weapons, though they were not visible.

His face was a little stern, but refined, and he wore no beard.

"Yes, sir, my name is Mabrey Markham," said Mr. Markham, pleasantly.

"And mine is Eugene Enders, sir, of England, and I believe a distant kinsman of yours."

"Captain Enders! indeed I am glad to see you, sir, for only last night I received letters that we might expect you."

"This is my daughter Madge, and also your cousin."

The maiden frankly advanced, offered her hand, and said:

"I am glad to welcome Captain Enders to Sunset Rest."

And in an easy way the conversation drifted on, about old England, the Markham Manor home, Daniel Markham and other matters of interest, until Coon put in an appearance quite excitedly, and called to Mr. Markham:

"Boss, der cowboys hes arriv' with them new cattle, an' wants ter know ef yer is goin' ter brand 'em afore yer turns 'em out with t'other critters?"

"I will come at once, Coon, and see to it, if the captain will excuse me," and Mr. Markham departed, leaving Madge and the young officer together, while Coon led the captain's horse to the stables.

With no embarrassment Madge continued the conversation, by asking:

"Have you been long in America, Captain Enders?"

"Only a few months."

"And you like the country?"

"Immensely; especially the wild life I have led on your vast and beautiful prairies; but I must confess to intense surprise that your father should settle in a land so uncivilized, and bring you with him."

"Ah! both father and I love this wild life."

"It is full of romance, excitement, and one cannot get the blues here."

"But pardon me, Captain Enders, as both father and myself have been so remiss as to neglect politeness."

"I will see that your room is made ready for you."

Madge departed, and the captain arose and leisurely strolled toward the river, where he threw himself down in the rustic arbor.

But hardly had he done so, when over the bank appeared the head and shoulders, and then the entire form of a man.

An apparition could not have startled the captain more, for he was on his feet in an instant, and springing forward, dealt the stranger a severe blow.

Backward a few paces the man staggered, but, with a cry of rage, he sprang upon his assailant, and instantly the two were locked in a fierce and desperate encounter, until a pistol-shot rung out, and one staggering backward, fell over the bank into the river, and was borne away on the swift current.

It was Captain Eugene Enders who had fallen into the river, apparently severely, if not mortally wounded, and panting, dripping, bleeding and white faced the other stood upon the bank, while toward him came running Mr. Markham, Madge, Miss Doolittle, Pepper and Coon, all of whom had been alarmed by the pistol-shot.

CHAPTER XLIII.

TRUE, OR FALSE?

THE shot that had been fired during the struggle of the two men so strangely met, and so strangely attacking each other, had alarmed the Markham household, and instantly all who heard it had hastened toward the scene, for the captain had been seen by Miss Doolittle, who was watching him from behind the curtain of the room she was preparing for him, to go toward the rustic arbor upon the river-bank.

Upon their arrival at the arbor they beheld not Captain Eugene Enders, but a man fully his height, erect, well-formed, and dripping wet.

He was clothed in an undress uniform, and upon his head was an East Indian cocked hat.

His sleeve was torn, as from a knife-thrust, and the blood was dropping from his arm to the ground while he bore other traces of having been in a severe encounter.

"Well, sir, who are you, may I ask?" and Mr. Markham spoke somewhat sternly, although there was a certain air about the stranger that commanded respect, in spite of his appearance and the circumstances under which he was surrounded.

"I am one, sir, who craves your protection and hospitality, for I was set upon by a gang of cutthroats back upon the prairie awhile since, and in the struggle was dismounted, robbed and wounded."

"Indeed, sir, I am sorry to hear this; but who could have been your assailants?"

"That I do not know, other than that they were a hard set, such as I have often seen here in this wild country."

"I cannot understand who should attempt such an outrage so near my home, and I will at once put my cowboys on their trail, and they shall be well punished," said Mr. Markham, indignantly.

"My dear sir, I assure you an even worse indignity was heaped upon me here in this spot, and by one whom I certainly thought to be a gentleman."

"You astound me, sir."

"Pray explain."

"I escaped from the ruffians, leaving my horse in their hands, and swam the river to reach your house."

"As I came over the bank a gentleman sat there in that arbor, and I was about to appeal to him, when he sprang upon me, struck me a violent blow, and drew a knife, as though to kill me."

"I grasped his arm, and in the struggle his pistol went off, and he fell backward into the river."

"Impossible."

"It is true, sir."

"My poor fellow, your misfortunes have unsettled your reason."

"Pardon me, sir, I am neither a fool or a madman."

"Describe the man."

"He was a large, handsome man, dressed in

a suit of army blue, such as the officers of the United States wear, and—"

"My dear sir, that was my kinsman and guest, Captain Eugene Enders."

"Captain Eugene Enders?" repeated the man, in a suppressed tone.

"Yes, sir, and I ask you where he is?"

"Your kinsman and guest?" again asked the stranger, in the same strange manner.

"Yes, and once more I ask you where he is?"

"My dear sir, I am Captain Eugene Enders!"

"You?" almost shrieked Mr. Markham.

"Yes, sir, I!"

"Eugene Enders?"

"Yes."

"My kinsman?"

"Are you Mabrey Markham?"

"That is my name."

"And I am Eugene Enders, the adopted son of Daniel Markham, your brother."

"Great God! the man is mad."

"I am perfectly sane, Mr. Markham; but you seem to be the madman," was the haughty reply.

Mr. Markham was about to make some angry reply, when Madge, who had remained a silent, but deeply interested listener to all that had been said, stepped forward and said:

"Father, permit me to ask this gentleman a few questions?"

"I am most willing to answer any questions Miss Markham may put to me, if I am not mistaken in believing you to be Miss Markham," was the reply, in a courtly tone and manner.

"Yes, I am Madge Markham, and, with my father, am greatly surprised at the sudden disappearance of our guest and kinsman, Captain Eugene Enders, of England."

"May I ask why you assert that you are that gentleman?"

"Because I am no other."

"And the one we call by that name?"

"Where is he?"

"The last I saw of him he was going down with the current."

"Dead?"

"He certainly looked so, Miss Markham."

"You killed him?"

"Upon my honor, no! His pistol went off, while he was trying to use it upon me, and he was the victim, not I."

Madge was bewildered, and turning to her father asked:

"Oh, sir! what does all this mystery mean?"

"It means, Madge, that this man is an impostor, and I shall hold him prisoner for the murder of Eugene Enders."

"Coon, go and bid Platte Paul to come here with some of his men."

"I'll do it, sah, an' de guilty shall not escape—dat am Scriptur'," and Coon darted away in the direction of the cowboy cabins.

"I am in your power, sir, and can offer no resistance; but I must beg that you satisfy yourself that I am no impostor and murderer, before you turn me over to your wild cattle men," said the stranger, calmly.

"I am satisfied, sir, with the evidence against you."

"Circumstantial evidence, my dear Mr. Markham, has hanged many an innocent man."

"And it may hang you, sir," was the angry reply.

But the stranger smiled, and his face showed no sign of fear.

"There come some men now, sir," cried Pepper, pointing down the river to where a party of horsemen were coming.

All glanced in the indicated direction, and the stranger said quietly:

"Yes, they are the very ones who waylaid, robbed, and tried to murder me."

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE REGULATORS.

THE men whom Pepper's quick eye had discovered coming up the river bank were six in number.

They were not a set to inspire confidence, for they were rough, uncouth, and boisterous, added to which they were well mounted and armed, and no one seemed to know who they were.

Mr. Markham looked a little anxious, and glanced beyond the house to see how far Coon had gotten on his way.

But he discovered that worthy Ethiopian trudging calmly along in the direction of the cowboys' cabins, which were nearly a mile distant, and then he remembered that Platte Paul and his pards had gone off with the cattle to a distant prairie pasture, and were then far away.

The stranger again spoke:

"Mr. Markham, I am unarmed, and my life is in danger at the hands of these cut-throats; yet I will sell it as dearly as I can, and I would advise that you urge your daughter and the other lady to retire to the house, and not be witnesses of a desperate encounter."

"Thank you, sir, for your consideration, but I shall remain."

"You, Miss Doolittle, can do as you deem best," said Madge, coldly.

"Then, dear Madge, I will remain near you, to protect and shield you from all danger, for though, under the circumstances, I don't know

as I should, and I don't know but *what* I should depart, that my maiden eyes may not look upon man's inhumanity to man, yet—"

"You then will resist, sir?" said Mr. Markham, as usual cutting off Miss Doolittle before she could continue further.

"I certainly shall, sir."

"You say they are cut-throats?"

"Of the worst kind."

"I confess I do not know them, but we will soon discover their errand here."

"I can tell you what it is."

"Well, sir?"

"They are on my trail."

"Why should they be?"

"I certainly do not know, unless it is to get my life as well as my money and other valuables, of which they robbed me."

As the stranger spoke he suddenly made a spring and jerked a revolver from Pepper's belt, and thus armed took his stand, with his back to the rustic arbor and a grim smile upon his face.

"Mad as a blind buffalo," muttered Pepper, while Miss Doolittle shrieked out:

"Oh, sir, do not kill us!"

"Madam, no one is in any danger at my hands unless he seek to take my life or do me an injury."

"Again I urge that you ladies go to the house."

"I shall remain, sir," was the firm response of Madge.

"In the heat of conflict, sir, I hope you will remember there are ladies present, and point your deadly weapon in the air," cried Miss Doolittle.

"Auntie, it is only the frightened that get hit," said Madge.

"I am not a bit frightened, Madge," and Miss Doolittle's chattering teeth bit her tongue twice in making the remark.

"Here they come!" said Pepper, and his hand was upon the second revolver he wore in his belt—for the youth was never found without his arms.

"Boys, thar he are, an' we hev treed him."

"Comel!"

A harsh voice spoke the words, and with exultant yells the six horsemen dashed up to the arbor and threw themselves from their horses.

"Back, men!" said the stranger, sternly.

"Bah! You is good grit, we knows, but yer can't shout ter skeer us, an' we bes come fer yer," cried one who seemed to be the leader.

"Hold on, men!"

It was Mr. Markham who spoke, and the leader answered:

"Waal, old pard, what are it?"

"Who are you?"

"Regulators."

"Where from?"

"Along ther Platte, wherever we hes biz ter regulate of a natur' like this."

"Do you know this person?"

"Know him?"

"Yes."

"This person?"

"Yes."

"Waal, now, I should perceed ter smile if we didn't."

"Who is he?"

"A fresh who needs saltin'."

"I do not understand you."

"That are a pity."

"Explain, please."

"What does yer want to know?"

"Who is this man, I asked you?"

"A road-agint."

"What?"

"Fact! He are one o' them rascals that makes honest men like us throw up ther han's on ther roadside, an' we is lookin' fer him."

"Do you speak the truth?"

"Look at me, pard!"

"I should decide against you, sir, after one glance in your face," said Madge, boldly.

"Hooty tooty! ther gal's chin hev broke loose, an' next it'll be ther old lady's put, an' then, boys—"

"I am not old, sir, for I am only twenty-f—"

"Whew!"

The six men all whistled in chorus, while the leader said, rudely:

"We cut ther lie off, old lady, fer ef you is twenty then I hain't weaned yet."

"Lordy! how wimmins will lie about ther' age!"

"Ob, Madge, I do wish that I had gone to the house, and then my ears would have been saved hearing such profanity," whined Miss Doolittle.

"Bah! I hain't sworn onst, an' ef we did sw'ar a green streak it w'u'dn't hurt them cast iron ears o' yours."

"Silence, sir, and do not prove yourself an insulter of ladies, or I will believe you are not the regulators you represent yourselves," said Mr. Markham.

"Pardon, pard, but ther old hen w'u'd chin in; but we asks her ter excoose us while we tend ter biz."

"We les come here fer this heur rooster, an' we intends ter clip his spurs."

"I warn you off," was the calm but resolute reply of the stranger.

"Now we hain't men as takes warnin', so come, my fine feller, give up thet weapin, or it'll be ther wu'st fer yer."

"One minute, please."

"Yas, old pard," and the leader again turned to Mr. Markham.

"Leave this man in my charge. I will be responsible for him, unless you know him to be guilty."

"We does know it, fer he are ther very cuss thet kilt ther mail courier, poor Sedgwick some time ago."

"Indeed! Can this be true?"

"It are, so yer see we wants him, an' what are more, we is goin' ter hev him."

"And what is your intention regarding him?"

"I pass!"

"How do you mean?"

"Say over thet talk yer said just now."

"What do you intend to do with him?"

"Hang him."

"Not without trial?"

"In course we is."

"No, no, you will not be guilty of a wrong like this?" cried Madge, indignantly.

"Guess yer don't know u, miss, fer thet is jist what we will do in ther line o' duty."

"We hates ter hang a man like p'izen, but this one are too dangersome ter run loose, so up he goes."

"Come, pards!"

At a given signal they ran upon the stranger, and instantly there rung out a sharp report, and one of the Regulators fell dead.

But the second barrel missed fire, and then, before a third time the trigger could be pulled by the plucky stranger, the five assailants threw themselves upon him.

Miss Doolittle shrieked, Mr. Markham knew not what to say or do, Pepper dodged about, revolver in hand, as though he meant to use it, if necessary, and Madge stood white and calm, gazing in horror upon the fierce scene, and Coon, afar off, heard the shot, looked back, and seeing the fracas fled like a deer across the prairie, while Phillis, evidently believing Mr. Markham needed aid, with more pluck than her sable liege lord, came running toward the arbor, bearing in her hand the tea-kettle of scalding water, a very prompt disperser of a fight, whether dog, cat, or human, when properly applied.

CHAPTER XLV.

LYNCH LAW.

THOUGH the stranger made a desperately brave fight, and won a cheer from Pepper for his pluck, it was but a case of a pack of hounds upon a tiger; they would conquer in the end.

And the gang did conquer, for they bore the stranger to the earth, lashed his hands behind him with a skill that seemed to indicate long practice in that kind of work, and then dragged him upon his feet again.

"Oh, you is a tough 'un," cried the leader.

"He hev slew Frisco Fresh," said another.

"Waal, we will hev our little revenge, an' boys, that are a prime limb fer a hangin' match."

"It are fer sartin, an' we'll give ther ladies a leetle treat, an' show 'em how we Regulators does biz."

"What! do you intend to carry out your vile threats?" asked the stranger, though he did not cower.

"We does."

"And hang me?"

"Sartin."

"You will not dare commit a murder so base."

"It are justice bein' distributed, pard, an' not murder."

"I have done no wrong."

"Look thar, pard," and the leader pointed to the dead man of their band, who had fallen under the fire of the stranger.

"He brought his death upon himself."

"Guess not, fer you kilt him."

"Mr. Markham, will you permit these devils to carry out their vile threats?"

"Alas, sir, I am powerless, as you see."

"I swear to you, sir, upon my honor, that I am no impostor, but in *propria persona* Eugene Enders, the adopted son of your brother."

"That is impossible, sir, though, for your own sake, I hope you believe the hallucination, for you are not in your right mind to make such an assertion."

The stranger gave an impatient toss of the head, and Madge said:

"This gentleman, father, is at least deserving of time to prove his words, for there may be some strange mistake or mystery here."

"There can be none, my child, and why he maintains what he does I cannot understand."

"But, Mr. Markham, you surely have eyes, and my lawyer, Richard Eyster, of Omaha, said that he sent you my photograph."

"Look at me and judge for yourself."

"But the photograph we did not receive, sir."

"It was not in the letter."

"Then it seems I am doomed."

"No, not until you have time to prove your assertion," said Madge.

"Now you look heur, miss; we is Regulators, an' we don't 'low no interference."

"We hes stood by an' listened ter yer chinin' out o' ther deep respect we hes fer yer."

"But I warn yer not ter interfere in our duty, fer yer'll come out worsted."

"Pray do not subject yourself to insult, Miss Markham, on my account."

"I expected a far different fate, in coming here, but be it what it may, I shall meet it like a brave man."

Madge glanced into the face of the stranger, her lips moved but uttered no word, and she bowed her head in silence, while Pepper said:

"Well, sir, you are game, and I wish to Heaven I could aid you."

"Shet up, youngster, or yer'll git regilated."

"Come, boys, put his cravat on an' tie it han'some."

The "cravat" meant a lariat, and the noose was at once placed around the neck of the stranger, who, though deadly pale, did not quiver in a single muscle.

"Throw your end over thet limb, Cheeky," was the next order, and promptly it was obeyed.

"Now draw!"

"Oh, father, save him!" burst from the lips of Madge.

"My child, I cannot"

"Permit me to obey your bidding, Miss Markham!"

The words, uttered in deep, well-known tones, fell like a thunderbolt upon all present; and Madge fairly shrieked out:

"Buffalo Bill! thank God!"

"Buffalo Bill!" yelled Pepper.

"Cody!" broke from the lips of Mr. Markham, who was delighted to have the responsibility of the cruel work shifted upon broader shoulders than his own.

"Buffler Bill! Ther devil!"

This last was uttered in chorus by the Regulators, not one of whom looked happy at the interruption, and sudden appearance of the scout.

CHAPTER XLVI.

BUFFALO BILL'S PLEDGE.

"I REALLY do not seem to be welcome to all present," and Buffalo Bill smiled as pleasantly as though he expected to be at once contradicted.

"Buffler Bill, yer hev made a mistake, fer we is not ter be bullied," said the leader of the Regulators, recovering from his astonishment at this unlooked-for coming of the scout, who had so coolly stepped from behind the arbor, with Coon at his heels, grinning like a monkey with delight, for he had seen Buffalo Bill and informed him—

"Thet suthin' were goin' wrong up dar, Massa Buf'lo Bill."

"Not to be bullied, my dear Montana Mike! Who would be so foolish as to think of bullying you and your gang of cut-throats— Hold on, there, all of you, for I came not here alone!"

Buffalo Bill held a revolver in each hand, and those of the Regulators who had attempted to draw their weapons hesitated and looked uneasily toward the arbor.

"Mr. Markham, I really think you are to be condoled with upon the new acquaintances you have formed," and Buffalo Bill still spoke in his calm, sarcastic way.

"You know these men then, Cody?"

"I do, sir."

"They told me they were the Regulators of the Platte, of whom I had heard."

Buffalo Bill laughed and answered:

"Why, my dear Mr. Markham, they are a gang I have wanted to catch in some deviltry for a long time."

"They are guilty, I know, but I have not been able to catch them in any act that would authorize me in making coyote food of them."

"They are not Regulators then?"

"No, sir."

"Who are they then?" and Mr. Markham seemed to feel he had placed too much faith in the men who had claimed to be the Regulators of the Platte, and terrors to all evil-doers.

They had been rude, were a rough-looking set, it was true, but then he set that down to ignorance.

"Who are they, you ask, sir?"

"Yes, are they not good men at heart, in spite of their rough exterior?"

"Diamonds in the rough, you mean? Well, sir, the only good one of their number is that one," and he pointed to the dead man.

Then he added:

"Like the proverbial *good Ingin*, he's only good because he's dead."

The stranger laughed lightly at this, and in spite of the suspense and her dread of what might come, Madge joined in.

"But who are they, Cody?" persisted Mr. Markham.

"They are some of the same kind I shot the day they attempted to run off with Miss Markham."

"Some call them the Devil's Dozen, others think there cannot be a dozen men so wicked, and give them the name of the Devil's *Half Dozen*, and if I have my way I'll cut them down still lower."

"You surprise me, Cody, for they came here

on the trail of this man, who is an impostor, and who murdered my guest and kinsman, Captain Eugene Enders."

"This is a severe charge against you, sir."

"It is made by Mr. Markham, sir, with the belief that it is true, for whoever came here before me claiming to be Eugene Enders was the impostor, for I bear that name."

"By the Rockies! but you look honest, and your voice has a true ring to it."

"But can you not prove who you are?"

"Do you not recognize your kinsman, Mr. Markham?"

"Unfortunately no, Cody, for I never saw him."

"A letter from a lawyer in Omaha told me of the death of my brother, and that he had left Madge his fortune, conjointly with his adopted son, Eugene Enders, who was to visit us here."

"Not two hours ago a gentleman came, professing to be Enders, and I welcomed him as such."

"An arrival of some cattle I had purchased called me away, and Madge left the captain on the piazza for a short time to prepare his room, and he walked down here."

"A shot alarmed us, and we came here to find this person, wet and wounded as you see, and our guest missing."

"He says that he swam the river, escaping from these men, who attacked and robbed him while coming here, and that upon landing on this shore, Enders sprung upon him, and in defending himself the revolver of the captain went off."

"And the captain?"

"Fell into the river, and was carried down by the stream, while this man boldly asserts that he is Captain Eugene Enders of England."

"This is indeed a mysterious affair."

"But have you nothing, sir, that can prove your assertion that you are the captain?"

"No, sir, nothing nearer than Omaha, where my lawyer knows me."

"Then a week or two will decide who is the impostor, and, until that time, I will be responsible for your safe-keeping."

"Yer'll do no such thing, Buffler Bill," angrily said the leader of the gang.

"I will."

"Jist try it on."

"Look here, Montana Mike, you know me, and are aware that I do not make idle threats."

"You were going to hang this gentleman, whom I look upon as innocent, simply because you say he is guilty."

"But I say you shall not hang him until I find out the truth of this matter."

"You find out?"

"Yes; for I shall do so."

"An' then?"

"If he is guilty, I'll turn him over to you, for he will richly deserve hanging."

"But he may not be heur then."

"Then I pledge myself to be here, and if I do not produce him in two weeks from to-day, I will deliver myself up to you."

"To hang?"

"Yes."

"It's a barg'in, fer tho' we hates yer, Buffler Bill, we hes never knowed yer ter break yer word, even ter a Injun."

"And I'll not break it to you, for you have my pledge."

"Now be off."

"Hain't we ter be invited ter stay ter supper?"

"No."

"Thet hain't squar'."

"Be off!"

"Don't git r'iled, fer we hes tuk yer word yer give us."

"And I'll give you more than that, if you drive me to it."

They hesitated an instant and then Montana Mike said:

"Can't we stay an' 'tend ther funeral?"

"What funeral?"

"Ther obs'quies."

"Of whom?"

"Our dear lamented pard."

"Take him with you."

"Hain't he ter hev Christi'n burial, poor cuss?"

"Bury him yourselves."

"Must we?"

Buffalo Bill's face flushed with anger, and it was plain to all that he was losing his temper. But he asked in an indifferent tone:

"Say, Montana Mike, do you know Wild Bill?"

"More'n likely," and the gang looked a little uneasy.

"And do you know Texas Jack?"

"We hes be'n interdooced ter him."

"Well, if you would like to renew your acquaintance with Wild Bill and Texas Jack I will call them."

"Coon, just tell—"

"Hold on, nigger, don't yer worry yerself, fer we hesn't time ter tarry jist now."

"Much obleeged fer yer perlite attention, Bill, but we hes a engagement jist now ter mourn over our departed brother."

"Raise him, boys, an' let's git afore thar is more cold meat around heur, fer ef Buffler Bill

toots, an' Wild Bill an' Texas Jack do come, then thar will be wailing an' tooth-gnashin' round heur."

His companions needed no urging, but throwing their dead comrade across the back of his horse, they mounted and rode hastily up the river, giving the arbor a wide berth.

"Now, Bill, call your friends, and we'll adjourn to the house," said Mr. Markham, breathing more freely after the gang had departed.

"What friends, sir?"

"Why, Wild Bill and Texas Jack."

"They are far from here, sir, and that was a ruse to frighten those fellows off, as I saw they meant mischief."

"Well, it was adroitly done."

"Come, sir, as Mr. Cody answers for you, I will consider you innocent until you are found guilty, as in law."

"Thank you, sir; but—"

The stranger staggered forward as he spoke, and fell his full length upon the ground.

Springing to his side, Buffalo Bill said:

"Poor fellow, he has been slowly bleeding all this time, and has fainted from utter weakness."

"Come, Coon, aid me here," and, raising the stranger from the ground, they bore him to the house, where Madge gave him the room prepared for the other claimant to the name of Eugene Enders.

CHAPTER XLVII.

KIDNAPPED.

THE stranger was most kindly cared for by Buffalo Bill and Mr. Markham, the latter very skillfully dressing his wounded arm, which was not serious, though it had bled very freely.

To Buffalo Bill he said:

"I feel that I owe you my life, sir, for I would have been shown no mercy by those rascals."

"Who that impersonation of myself is, I do not know, any more than I do his motive; but I am Eugene Enders, and I will give you proof of it, though I do not blame my kinsman for doubting me under the circumstances."

"I wish to believe you, sir; but for the present keep quiet and get well, and then we'll go on the trail to find out this mystery," returned Buffalo Bill, kindly, and he then left the room and joined Mr. Markham and Madge on the piazza.

"Well, Cody, what do you think of all this?" asked Mr. Markham.

"That the wounded stranger tells the truth."

"And the other one?"

"Why should he not be considered an impostor as well as this one, Mr. Markham?"

"There, that is my argument, Mr. Cody, and I must confess, of the two, I would far rather trust the one now under our roof," said Madge.

"Will you give me any points by which I can form a better idea of the case?" asked Buffalo Bill.

"I will tell you the whole story, with father's permission," answered Madge.

"Certainly, my child, for if Mr. Cody, is to act for us in this matter, I wish him to know all."

Madge then told the story to Buffalo Bill, as it is known to the reader, her father now and then adding a few words to cause him to better understand it.

"Then there is a cause for a man, knowing the facts, to play the part of Eugene Enders," said Bill.

"But why should he, when he knew the real Enders must turn up and discover his fraud?"

"A man who would attempt such a bold game, sir, would take good care that the real Enders would not appear."

"How do you mean, Cody?"

"He would kill him, or get him out of the way."

"True, he might do that."

"He would certainly have stakes high enough to play for, in doing so, for he would get a large fortune, and the hand of Miss Markham, as I understand it," said Buffalo Bill.

Just then Cripple Kit came up, and Mr. Markham cried:

"Well, Kit, I am glad to see you back, for I feared you had fallen into the hands of the Philistines."

"Oh no, sir. I waited for Mr. Cody, but I see now why he did not pass."

"Yes, Kit, I gave up the courier trail, and came over to see Mr. Markham, and was lucky enough to arrive in good time."

"Which trail did you come?"

"Up the river, sir."

"Did you meet any one?"

"No, sir."

"All right, Kit; keep a bright watch to-night, for there are some hawks about that may mean mischief."

Supper was now announced by Miss Doolittle, and in spite of the excitement of the afternoon all seemed to relish the juicy antelope steaks, fried potatoes, steaming coffee and hot biscuit.

As they adjourned to the piazza, for it was a lovely, balmy evening, they were all struck by a peculiar scent pervading the house.

"What can it be?" said Miss Doolittle.

"It has a medicinal smell," said Mr. Markham.

"I have been wounded of en enough, sir, to recognize it."

"It is chloroform," and Buffalo Bill bounded across the room and opened the door in which they had placed the wounded stranger.

"As I feared! he has gone!" he announced, calmly.

"Gone?" cried the others in chorus.

"Yes, they have chloroformed him and carried him off."

"Who have, Cody?" petulantly said Mr. Markham.

"The Devil's Half Dozen, sir," was the cool reply of the scout.

CHAPTER XLVIII. THE LEAGUE OF THREE.

"WELL, Cody, what is to be done?" asked Mr. Markham, nervously, for the death of his brother and the scenes so lately transpiring were beginning to tell upon him.

"Platte Paul is with you, sir?"

"Yes, he went with the other boys to drive the cattle to the upper prairie, and I guess they came back to their cabin."

"Will you let Kit go after him, and tell him to come here, with one of his best men, both prepared for a journey?"

"Certainly; here, Kit, you heard what Mr. Cody said, so go at once."

In half an hour's time Platte Paul came, accompanied by another cowboy, and calling them aside Buffalo Bill gave them some orders, and they at once departed.

"Do you mind telling me where they have gone, Cody?"

"Will you pardon me if I do not, Mr. Markham? for though I would not suspect one of your household for the world, I am getting very cautious," and Buffalo Bill glanced toward Pepper, who saw the look and flushed crimson.

Mr. Markham and Madge also saw the glance, and they felt hurt that the scout seemed to doubt one whom they would have trusted with their lives under any and all circumstances.

But Bill said nothing, and for some time paced to and fro.

Then he bade all good-night and retired to his room, leaving his host considerably worried at his rather cavalier conduct.

But Madge said:

"Father, Mr. Cody is playing some deep game, I can see, and I have faith in him that all will come out right."

"I hope so, child," and for half the night he paced his room, too anxious to sleep.

With the dawn of day he was up, and asking about the scout. Kit told him that his horse was gone from the stable, and further search revealed the fact that he had not been in bed, but had left without a word of farewell or explanation.

Then, to add to the troubles of the ranchero, Kit came in and said:

"I am sorry, Mr. Markham, to trouble you just at this time about my affairs, but I received a letter by the courier yesterday, telling me my old mother had come West to seek me, and was lying dangerously ill at Omaha."

"Indeed, Kit, I sympathize with you; but what can you do?"

"I would like to go there, sir."

"You cannot go alone."

"Mr. Markham, I can find my way easily, for the trail is an open one, and I would risk a thousand dangers to see my mother, for if she died without my going to her, it would be a fearful blow to me."

"Well, Kit, you can go, certainly, and I will let you have what money you need."

"I thank you, sir, and can I take the clay-bank?"

"Yes," and half an hour after the faithful but unfortunate son was away upon his filial errand, with the head of Yellow Chief turned toward Omaha.

It was a somewhat saddened household that sat down to breakfast that morning at Sunset Rest, for Mr. Markham considered himself badly treated by Buffalo Bill, who had not taken him into his confidence, and Miss Doolittle was, "just a shade short of vinegar," Pepper said, while Madge was silent and thoughtful.

There had been a bottle of chloroform found in the stranger's room, which showed how he had been so easily overcome, and the window was up, and heavy tracks beneath it, that plainly indicated the manner in which the kidnappers had made their *entrée* and exit with their victim.

The more Madge thought over the affair, the more she inclined to the belief that the first claimant of the name of Eugene Enders was the impostor.

The day dragged wearily along, and toward evening a horseman was seen coming over the prairie.

All thought that it was Buffalo Bill, but as he drew nearer Madge said:

"It is Platte Paul."

And so it was, returning slowly, for both man and horse seemed worn out.

"Well, Paul?" cried Mr. Markham, eagerly.

"I got him."

"Where did you capture him?"

"Was it the same gang that kidnapped him?"

"Is he alive?"

The questions pouring in upon the chief of the cowboys, from Mr. Markham, Madge and Miss Doolittle, bewildered him, and he cried:

"Jist hold on a bit, fer durned ef I ever were a good scholar ter answer questions."

"Cap'n, you comes first, so what did you ax me?"

"Where did you capture him?"

"On ther road. Met him goin' ter see ther very man who wanted him."

"Met who?"

"Wild Bill, of course."

"Wild Bill?"

"Fact."

"Oh! you do not mean the stranger?"

"Durn ther stranger!"

"Buffalo Bill sent me arter Wild Bill, an' my pard arter Texas Jack."

"I met Bill an' told him whar ter jine Buffalo, an' I s'pose my pard will find Jack, an' then thar will be a team o' kickers thet folks had better stand away from."

"Bravo! I knew Mr. Cody had a plot on hand, and with the League of Three victory will follow," cried Madge, joyously.

"Mister Buffalo Bill, Mister Wild Bill, and Mister Texas Jack?"

"Yes, auntie."

"Do tell! What did you call 'em, Madge?"

"The League of Three."

"And well named, Madge," said Mr. Markham, considerably cheered now he knew that the Princes of the Prairie were to take the trail together.

"Well, I don't know as they are, and I don't know but what they are, Captain Markham, but—"

What more Miss Doolittle was going to say was cut short by the sudden departure of her hearers, Pepper throwing a somersault out of the piazza and Platte Paul driving the spur into the flanks of his tired horse, with the remark:

"Come, mustang, we must git, for we hes rid many a mile an' hed no rest fer twenty hours, an' we can't stan' heur ter be butted, kin we?—for she butts worse nor a blind buffler bull."

CHAPTER XLIX.

A TRIO OF TRAILERS.

Two days after the departure of Buffalo Bill from Sunset Rest, he stood in a wild gorge of the hills, many miles away from the ranch.

His horse was cropping grass near by, his saddle lying by the lariat pin, and the scout was pacing to and fro, ever and anon glancing out over the prairie, for, from where he stood, he had an extensive view of miles of rolling plain.

"It is strange that neither Jack or Bill have come, for I sent those cowboys right where they would be most likely to find them, and I can hardly believe my good luck is going to desert me in this case."

"Well, I will wait until noon, and if they do not come then I will follow on this trail alone, and, in spite of odds, risk the rescue of that poor fellow, for somehow I believe him to be the real Enders."

"I told the boys to tell my pards where they would strike my trail, and I have left it plain enough, I know, so something must have gone wrong."

For some moments after muttering the above, he paced to and fro, with head downcast, as though laying some plan of action.

Then he looked up suddenly, and again glanced over the prairie.

"Hal there comes Jack, by the Holy Rock!" he cried, gleefully, and he bent his glass long and earnestly upon a horse and rider far out upon the prairie.

"Oh, I knew the old boy would come, if he got my word."

"Well, I am half made now, and Jack and I will play it together, if Wild Bill fails to put in an appearance, for he won't count the odds, no matter if they are twelve to one against us."

Again he was silent, watching the approach of Texas Jack, who was urging his horse rather hard for a man on a long trail; but then Jack was always a hard rider under any circumstances.

"By the two Plattes! but there comes Wild Bill!"

Again the cry broke joyously from his lips, as far in the rear of Texas Jack he now saw another horseman.

Turning his glass upon him he continued, speaking aloud:

"Yes, that is old Bill, true and stanch to the death, and driving that mare of his harder than even Jack forces his horse, for fear he may not be in at the flight."

"Bravo, old pards in a hundred wild battles, I might have gotten a score of gallant cowboys to aid me on this trail, but I preferred your two good right arms to all others."

"And if we don't make them devils reckon costs, then men speak falsely who call us Princes of the Prairie."

So delighted was Buffalo Bill at the coming of his friends, that he paced to and fro with a look of almost boyish glee in his handsome face.

Little dreaming that the one they were going

to join was watching them, and unable to see each other, on account of the rolling prairie, both Texas Jack and Wild Bill pressed on, not sparing their tired horses.

"Ho! Jack, I greet you."

"Vira! Buffalo Bill," and the two prairie pards clasped hands.

"You came, old boy?"

"You sent for me, Bill?"

"I need you."

"I am here."

"Good, and soon we will strike the trail."

"What's up, Bill?"

"Look here, do you see that horseman coming?"

"Wild Bill, by the Star of Texas!"

"Yes."

"You sent for him, too?"

"I did."

"You need him?" volunteered Jack, dryly.

"I do."

"I'm not at all curious, but what's up?"

"Wait until Bill comes."

"Let us give him a scare, Bill."

"I'll give you a hat if you tell me how it can be done."

"Good. I'll do it."

"He don't scare, Jack."

"He isn't of a scary nature, I'll admit; but let us try him on just for fun."

"How?"

"Get behind that tree, and I'll take this one."

Buffalo Bill did as directed, and when Wild Bill came near, still pushing his horse hard, and his eyes on the trail, Jack yelled in stentorian tones:

"Up with your hands or die!"

"Die it is then!"

The plucky answer had not left his lips, before Wild Bill had thrown himself from his tired horse, and with a revolver in each hand was rushing upon what he believed his ambushed foes.

"I cave, Bill, I'm your pard," yelled Jack, and as Wild Bill halted, he continued:

"I own up, Buffalo, I was more scared than Bill, for he did look as though he'd get in on me before I could sing out."

Buffalo Bill laughed loudly, and then stepping out said:

"Welcome, Bill."

"You two boys must have struck a gold mine to make you so jolly," said Wild Bill, coolly.

"I'm on the trail of a ten-strike, Bill; but don't be cross because you didn't get the chance to clean out half a dozen road-agents, for you'll have a good time yet."

"What is it, Buffalo?"

"The Devil's Dozen."

"No?"

"True, and I sent for you to help me."

"And Jack, too?"

"Yes."

"Must be in full force?"

"They are."

"So are we."

There was not the slightest braggadocio about the man when he said this, but only the look of one who knew well his power.

"Yes, the Blessed Three against the Devil's Dozen," laughed Jack.

"We'll be a well cursed three before we get through with those fellows; but now, pards, let us eat, talk, rest and then strike the trail and hold it to the bitter end."

"I'm agreeable," said Jack.

"You know me, Buffalo," remarked Wild Bill, and thus was made the compact of the "League of Three," and a trio of trailers whose superiors have never been known on the border.*

CHAPTER L.

THE VICTIM.

WHEN the stranger who called himself Captain Eugene Enders was left alone in the cosy chamber that had been assigned to him, he lay thinking of the scenes through which he had passed, and the narrow escape he had made from being hanged.

Then before his vision came the beautiful face of Madge Markham, and he muttered:

"As lovely as a dream, and one who shall yet be mine."

Perhaps it was her vision that soothed him, for he sunk into a deep sleep.

But ere long terrible dreams came to him, and he lived them as in the very real.

One moment he was falling over a precipice, and the next, dashing madly along on the back of an enraged buffalo.

Again, he was tied to the back of a mad steed and then being lowered into a bottomless pit.

With a mighty effort he awoke, and at first he knew not where he was.

It was dark and he was in motion, yet not by his own free will.

He soon realized that he was riding, and it

*Of this trio, Buffalo Bill is the only one living, and his home is in North Platte, not far from the spot where occurred the scenes narrated in this story. Wild Bill was murdered several years ago in Deadwood, and Texas Jack died in Leadville.—THE AUTHOR.

took him an instant only to find out that he was tied upon the back of a horse.

Others were around him, but they were riding upright in their saddles.

At last he recalled all, and where he had been when he dropped to sleep.

"I have been unconscious, and have been carried away for some purpose."

"Ho, there! Where am I?"

All near him, a dozen in number, started at his voice and one answered:

"Yer is on ther back o' a horse."

"But where?"

"On ther pararer."

"Where was I taken from?"

"Markham's ranch."

"Ahl and whither do you bear me?"

"Ter death, I reckon."

"Who are you?" was the next question, without the slightest tremor of the voice.

"Ther Devil's Dozen they calls us."

"Hal then I am again in the power of you vile wretches?"

"Yas."

"And my noble protector, Buffalo Bill, they call him?"

"He hain't along."

"Where is he?"

"Back at ther ranch."

"Is he dead?"

"No; only wish he were."

"How did you get me out of the house and not awaken me or arouse the inmates?"

"A leetle kerliform did it prim."

"By Heaven! you drugged me?"

"Sure."

"Men, what have you against me, that you should so maltreat me?"

"Nothin'."

"Then why do you persecute me?"

"Business."

"Business?"

"Yas."

"What do you mean?"

"We is paid for it."

"Paid for it?"

"Sure."

"Who pays you?"

"One who has the stamps ter do it."

"And I too can pay."

"Whar's yer stamps?"

"In Omaha."

"Too far, pard."

"But I am willing to pay more for my life than another man would."

"Dunno 'bout that."

"Try me."

"How kin we?"

"I will give you double the sum he does."

"Whar are it?"

"I told you, in Omaha."

"Say, pard, put up, or shet up."

"Answer me, is this the man who tried to take my name?"

"Say, I hes answered yer catechiz like a sick Sunday-school kid, an' I says no more."

"One more question."

"Waal?"

"How many of you are there?"

"Enough to keep you from sp'illin'."

"Are you afraid to tell me?"

"Nary."

"Then do so."

"One dozen."

"And how much do each one of you get for this dirty work?"

"Pard, you is as cur'us as a ole woman."

"Answer me!"

"One thousand each."

"And your orders?"

"Is ter take yer inter ther mount'ins, keep yer thar until ther boss sends word, an' then ter kill yer."

"Thank you, for you are at least frank and communicative."

All this time the poor prisoner had been suffering agony from his bonds, and the position in which he was bound, yet not a groan escaped him.

At last he said in an indifferent tone:

"This is not a very comfortable position to be in."

"Likely," said the one who had answered all of his questions.

"Can you not better it?"

"How?"

"By allowing me to sit up?"

"Nary."

"Do you fear me?"

"No, we don't fear nothin'."

"Then let me sit up, for I am wounded, and this motion, bound as I am, will reopen the wound."

"Fact."

"Then you will do as I wish, for you can bind my feet beneath the horse."

"We'll do it, fer yer is brim-full o' game, and thet is what we admirs."

"Yes, you have so little of the quality yourself," was the bold reply.

"Don't sass me, or I won't give yer no freedom of yer is game as a banty rooster."

The prisoner said no more, and the man, who was Montana Mike, soon after allowed him to sit upright upon his horse, but kept his feet securely bound.

And thus the Devil's Dozen and their victim continued on their way to the hills, where the captive was plainly told that he would be put to death.

CHAPTER LI.

THE DOOM.

It was the third day after leaving Sunset Rest with their prisoner that we find the Devil's Dozen halted in a wild place in the hills.

There were twelve present, for one of their number had just overtaken them by hard riding, bringing a message from the man who paid for the life of the victim.

That message they were discussing, while the prisoner, bound to a tree not far away, heard all that was said.

"You seen him, Californy?"

"I told yer."

"An' he says what?"

"Jist what I told yer."

"Talk it over ag'in, fer the boys wants ter git it by heart, an' I guesses ther priz'ner thar w'd like ter know," said Montana Mike.

"Waal, he said ter me, says he:

"Californy, go arter ther gang, an' tell 'em ter strike ther Death Camp Hill."

"We is right thar."

"I knows thet well enough."

"Waal, he says, says he:

"Californy, tell 'em they'll find thar some graves as were dug fer fellers as didn't die with ther epidemic, an' my orders is ter put thet feller right inter a grave an' fill it in on top o' him."

"Durnation! not alive?"

"Yas, Montana Mike, them were his orders."

"What ef we don't?"

"I am ter see it did, or yer don't git yer dust."

"Then we is ter be paid?"

"Yas."

"It is yer ther dust with yer, Californy?"

"I hain't a durned fool, Mike."

"Waal, are thar any hurry?"

"Yas."

"What are it?"

"Thar are a regimint gittin' ready ter strike yer trail."

"A regimint of sogers?"

"Not adzactly."

"Who is they, then?"

"Three men."

"Three men?"

"Yas."

"Who keers fer three men?"

"You does."

"We is a dozen."

"That's all right, an' they is one more."

"I thort yer said three."

"Waal, they is valued at a dozen."

"Who in thunder be they?"

"Buffler Bill."

"Ther devil?"

"Yas."

"He are one."

"Wild Bill."

"Durnation!"

"Yas."

"Thet are two."

"Texas Jack."

"Thunderation!"

"Thet are ther team, an' they works well together."

"They does. An' they is arter us?"

"Fact."

"Waal, I guesses we has no biz heur, so pards we must travel."

"Yas," said all in chorus, evidently seized with terror at the names of those who were on their trail.

"Pard, you bes ter die."

The remark was made to the prisoner. He had heard all, and his face was livid; but he said firmly:

"Very well, I do not fear death."

"Does yer know how yer is ter die?"

"I cannot believe men so base as to propose what I heard awhile ago, as the manner of killing me."

"Waal, human natur' bes got down putty low, pard; but them is our orders, an' we kin stan' it ef you kin."

There was a grim humor in this remark.

"No, no, kill me with knife or pistol, or by torture; but do not bury me alive!"

The man's voice was earnest, yet still unquivering.

But he spoke to men with hearts of stone.

Some might have been willing to spare him, as he was no real foe to them, and others were indifferent; but then their reward was only to be paid if they buried their prisoner alive.

That reward made adamant of their hearts, and Montana Mike sung out:

"Whistle yer prayers lively, pard, fer we bes no tarryin' time, bein' as we expects company."

Appeals were vain, and the man set his teeth close and shut his eyes, while they bound him securely, and then put a blanket all around him.

"Ter do ther thing up corpse-like," Montana Mike said with a rude laugh.

Then down into the grave they lowered the victim with their lariats, and jerking them out he was left there.

And upon the quivering form fell the soft earth, until the grave was full.

But there was an act going on behind the scenes which the Devil's Dozen did not see, for it was hidden from their view by many feet of earth.

What that act was, the next chapter will reveal.

CHAPTER LII.

THE LEAGUE AT WORK.

"THEY are above us, Bill."

"Yes, and let us be up and at them."

"No, Jack, wait and see what devilish game they came here to play, and then we have time to act," said Buffalo Bill.

The three scouts had headed the Devil's Dozen off, having known the trail they had to take, and had reached a canyon below the Death Camp Hill some time before them.

They had crouched beneath the sandy bank of the hill, leaving their horses up the canyon, and then they waited.

And to their ears, over the cliff, but thirty feet high, came the words of the desperate gang.

All that was said they heard, and then the sound over their heads told them that the victim was lowered into a grave just above them.

"I can hear the earth fall," cried Buffalo Bill, and whipping out his long keen bowie, he raised his hand above his head and drove the blade deep into the soft, sandy soil.

Rapidly it fell in one continued stream, deluging the scout from head to foot, and forming a pile about his knees.

But still he worked on, until presently he felt the blade touch something that gave before it.

One pull, and down into the cavity beneath fell the victim and half a ton of earth, while daylight shone through the grave above their heads.

With the rapidity of thought the blanket was torn from him, and his bonds cut, and then the man gasped, opened his eyes, glanced upon his rescuers, then up through the grave and realized all.

"They are there," he whispered, hoarsely.

"Yes, take this pistol and we will aid you and follow."

They thrust him upward, and the next instant he clambered out of the grave, just as the Devil's Dozen were saddling their horses.

Into their midst he rushed like a madman, and behind him came the League of Three.

Then with shrieks the outlaws started to fly.

But rapidly the revolvers rattled and almost in an instant's time the battle had ended and the League of Three had triumphed.

CHAPTER LIII.

A SURPRISE AT SUNSET REST.

AN air of contentment certainly prevailed at Sunset Rest ranch, after it became known that the League of Three were upon the trail, to follow it to the bitter end, and solve the mystery that then rested upon the name of Eugene Enders.

"Madge, is that Cody coming?" cried Captain Markham, suddenly, one day, the fourth after the kidnapping of the stranger from his room.

The household were all seated upon the piazza, their favorite assembling place, and Mr. Markham had pointed out across the prairie, where a horseman was visible approaching.

"Oh, father!"

The cry broke from her lips as an exclamation, and she turned very pale.

"Quick, child! who is it?"

"The first Eugene Enders."

"Great God! and safe! Then we were right after all," and Mr. Markham went out to meet the horseman, who just then rode up to the hitching-post.

"Mr. Markham, I am glad to meet you again," he said in his easy way.

"And I to see you, Captain Enders, for we never expected to have that pleasure again."

The two walked to the piazza, and then the captain received a welcome from Madge and Miss Doolittle, though a rather cold one from the former.

"Now, captain, let us hear how it is that you are, as it were, risen from the dead, for we all certainly believed that you had met your death, and never expected to see you again alive."

"Nor did I expect, sir, at one time to have the pleasure of again seeing you in your happy home, for I had certainly a close chance with death," and the captain spoke in his calm, easy way, as though conversing upon a most ordinary topic.

"Pray tell us, sir, all about it, and then I will make known to you what has occurred here, for a most exciting time indeed followed your mysterious and sudden disappearance."

"All that happened here I know, Mr. Markham, and I have a strange story to reveal to you."

"But how can you know it, sir?" and Mr. Markham gazed with surprise upon the handsome man, as did also Madge and Miss Doolittle, while Pepper sat on the piazza steps attentively regarding him, with a look in his sad eyes as though he was recalling faces of the bygone.

The captain was dressed as upon his former

coming to Sunset Rest ranch, and looked just as handsome as then, though he was quite pale, and there was a wound over his temple, as if a bullet had cut its way along there, though it was slight.

"Now, Captain Enders, pray give us the story, for we are all curiosity to hear it, though as we are almost strangers, I do not know as I should ask you, and I don't know but *what* I should; but—"

"Yes, my dear captain, we are all attention," cried Mr. Markham, quickly, cutting off Miss Doolittle suddenly.

"Well, to begin, I must tell you that a party of us came over to this country from England, determined upon a hunt upon the prairies of your vast and beautiful land.

"We were all friends, and among the party was Sir Barry Greyfield, an intimate friend and brother officer of mine.

"He had, poor fellow, received a wound in the head, while in India, and often suffered from it, but we thought that it would not prove serious, until one day, just as I was preparing to leave camp to visit you, as I wrote you I would do—"

"Wrote me?"

"Yes, sir; I wrote you fully of my adopted father's death, the terms of his will, and that I would soon visit you."

"I received no such letter, sir."

"Indeed! then what can you think of me?"

"I heard from a lawyer, Richard Eyster, of Omaha, that my brother was dead, and how he had made his will, and I also received a letter written by brother Daniel some time ago, but nothing more."

"I am surprised at this, as, upon learning your address I at once wrote you fully, but was kept from visiting you at the time stated by the breaking of my leg, through the falling of my horse upon me."

"Indeed! you were unfortunate, sir; but I hope you have fully recovered," said Madge.

"Thank you, yes."

"But we have interrupted your story, captain," remarked Mr. Markham.

"Yes, I was saying that I was about to leave camp to come to visit you, when Sir Barry Greyfield's mind suddenly left him, and he became as it were a madman."

"This was very sad," said Mr. Markham.

"A visitation of Providence, which doeth all things well," put in Miss Doolittle, with a singing tone and downcast eyes.

"Poor fellow," remarked Madge, in her kindly way.

"Yes, poor fellow, indeed, for it turned out most serious, and the strangest of all was that he had the hallucination that he was no longer Sir Barry Greyfield but none other than myself."

"Ah!" said Mr. Markham, and dawn began to break upon the minds of all of the listeners.

"Yes, he said he was Captain Eugene Enders, insisted upon being addressed as such, and I gave instructions to all in camp to humor him as such, and they did so.

"Intimate friends, and knowing the confidential affairs of each other, he knew all about me, and began to tell others my private matters, believing them to be his own.

"One night, seeing that he did not improve, we decided to break camp and return to the settlements, whence he could be sent under proper care to England, and I was anxious to visit you, after my long delay from a broken leg."

"But that night poor Sir Barry made his escape, and we were days searching for him."

"Giving him up as lost, from having been met and killed by Indians, or torn to pieces by wild beasts—"

"Oh!" shuddered Miss Doolittle, but whether at the cruelty of the Indians, or the wild beasts toward the baronet none knew.

"I therefore," continued Captain Enders, "determined to come on and see you, and you remember how I arrived, and my most mysterious disappearance, which I have yet to tell you of?"

"Indeed we do remember it, sir, for when we left you for a few moments, and came back to find another claiming to be Captain Enders, it was a shock to us all, I assure you," said Mr. Markham.

"Pray explain the mystery, Captain Enders?" Madge asked, and Miss Doolittle was pursing up her lips for a remark, when Mr. Markham put in quickly:

"Yes, captain, give us all the story for we are most anxious to hear it."

CHAPTER LIV.

THE CAPTAIN'S STORY.

"You, I believe, Mr. Markham, was called away by the arrival of a lot of cattle?" said Captain Enders, addressing Mr. Markham, and in a manner that showed he was recalling all the circumstances that had occurred and wished to make no mistakes.

"Yes, sir, I was called off by the arrival of my cowboys with a lot of new cattle, that I had purchased from a neighboring ranchero."

"And soon after, Miss Markham, you also left me?"

"Yes, sir, I went to see that your room was ready for you, and to inform Miss Doolittle that we had a guest with us."

"Well, I glanced at the pretty view for a while, after being left alone, and then, lured by the pretty arbor on the river-bank, sauntered there."

"Soon I was surprised by a splashing sound, and glancing up beheld a man rising from the water."

"He sprang up the bank dripping wet, and spying me rushed toward me, knife in hand."

"To my horror I recognized my mad friend, Sir Barry Greyfield, and started toward him, calling him by name."

"I am not Sir Barry Greyfield, but Captain Eugene Enders," he shouted, in ringing tones.

"To calm him, I called out:

"Well, Eugene, I am glad to meet you, for I made a mistake, as we look so much alike."

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Sir Barry Greyfield," I answered, to humor him.

"Liar!"

"The word was shouted in a frenzy, and he rushed upon me with his knife uplifted."

"What a scene for the brush of an artist," simpered Miss Doolittle.

"It was more like a scene for an undertaker, auntie," was the smiling remark of Madge.

"A most thrilling scene, indeed," said Mr. Markham.

"Good enough for a dime novel," muttered Pepper.

"Pray continue," said Madge, as she saw that the thread of the story was being broken by these comments.

"I retreated backward, trying to calm him, but I might as well have tried to check the Platte as that madman, and, unable to do so, I was foolish enough to let him spring upon me."

"I knew that physically I had always been his superior, and thought to capture him and cry for aid; but I forgot, most strangely, the wonderful power of a madman, and finding that I had met my master, drew a weapon with the hope of intimidating him, though I did not intend to use it unless necessarily compelled to do so."

"He clutched savagely for the weapon, and it went off."

"I remember that much and no more, until some time after."

"We were upon the very brink of the river bank, and the bullet grazed my temple here, as you see, temporarily stunning me, and I fell back into the swiftly flowing stream."

"The cold water revived me quickly, and I returned to semi-consciousness to find myself struggling in the stream, which was bearing me swiftly downward upon its swollen bosom, for the rains above had caused it to rise at that time, you may remember."

All recalled the circumstance of the swollen river, and Captain Enders resumed:

"I was very weak and still dazed by the wound in my head, slight as it was, so that I was only able to keep myself afloat for awhile."

"At last I saw a clump of timber upon a point of land, and determined to make an effort to reach it."

"It was a desperate struggle for life, and only after a long time I reached the shore and clambered up, when I fainted from weakness."

"When I again recovered consciousness, I found myself in an Indian tepee, and, to my surprise, was being kindly cared for, from the appearance of things around me, though I saw no red-skin."

"Ah! the noble red-men of the forest—"

"The prairie, auntie."

"The forest, Cooper says, Madge, and he ought to know, for did he not write that rapturous history, the Last of the Moccasins, and those gems of Indian literature, the Leather Breeches Tales—"

"Oh, Miss Doolittle—"

"Oh! Miss Markham! I know whereof I speak, and I could not refrain from a burst—a burst of rapture, when I knew that the noble red-men of the forest had saved the life of dear Captain Enders, when, bothered as they have been from time immemorial, by the pale-faces of civilization, I don't know as they should, and I don't know but *what* they should; but—"

"But, Miss Doolittle, they did save me, for I had been found upon the river bank by one of the tribe who had been the guide of our hunting-party some time before and he had taken me to his camp and cared for me most kindly—"

"I know that you treated him with kindness when he was your guide, Captain Enders," simpered Miss Doolittle.

"Yes, madam, I assure you that I did, for I sent him to bed, or rather to his blanket, gloriously drunk every night, and in many other little kindly ways showed my appreciation of his services."

Mr. Markham and Madge laughed at this, but the captain looked as serious as did Miss Doolittle, while Pepper muttered:

"He understands Injun human nature."

CHAPTER LV.

WELL MET.

"In a short time," continued the captain, "the Indian looked into the tepee, and was rejoiced to see me recovering."

"He told me how he had found me, and that he and his squaw had done all in their power to restore me to health."

"The medicine-man of the tribe had been called in, and he had given me some decoctions of herbs, which at least did me no harm, and then he was sent for again, and what he administered certainly helped me amazingly."

"Strengthened in a day and night, by rest, I purchased a good horse from my Indian friend, with an officer's saddle and bridle, all of which had been stolen, he hinted, and started upon my return to your hospitable house."

"Which I am happy to say you have reached in safety," fervently said Mr. Markham.

"True, sir, but there is more to tell."

"Indeed! then let us have it, my dear captain."

The captain then resumed:

"The Indian offered to be my guide here, but feeling that I had had prairie experience enough to find my way, I started alone."

"Having to head a divide I lost my way, and was roaming about wholly bewildered when night overtook me."

"Afar off I descried the glimmer of a camp-fire, and toward it I cautiously rode."

"Reconnoitering, I saw that it was a camp of white men, and to my intense surprise I recognized, bound to a tree, none other than my own impersonator, Sir Barry Greyfield."

"There were other men, also bound, and three at liberty, and I may say that I never in my life beheld a more magnificent trio."

"Hal Buffalo Bill and his two pards," cried Mr. Markham, excitedly.

"Yes, sir, they were Buffalo Bill, a scout whose name I have often read of in England, Wild Bill, and Texas Jack, two other noted prairie men."

"As I thought, sir; but you interest us greatly."

"I went into the camp," resumed Captain Enders, "and received from the scouts a somewhat cold reception, and felt that I was wholly at their mercy."

"But I told them who I was, and gave them a history of poor Sir Barry, and his visit to you, and attack upon me."

"They conversed together apart for a while, and then asked me innumerable questions, all of which they seemed to think I answered to their entire satisfaction."

"Then they told me of what had occurred here, after my fall into the river, and how Sir Barry had been kidnapped by the Devil's Dozen, as they called the band of border marauders."

"Yes, he was chloroformed and taken from beneath my roof," said Mr. Markham.

"So they said, and Buffalo Bill at once sent your cowboys, he told me, for his two pards, as they call their comrades here, and took the trail of the kidnappers."

"With success, too."

"Yes, sir."

"I knew that Cody would hunt that trail to its end, Madge."

"Yes, father, I felt we could trust him; but, Captain Enders, what could have been the motive of the band, who answer to that purgatorial name of Devil's Dozen, for kidnapping your friend?" asked Madge Markham.

"They knew him to be an English gentleman of title and wealth, suspected not that he was a madman, and expected a large ransom from him."

"Ah! that explains their conduct; but what was done with him, captain?"

"The scouts, it seems, followed the Devil's Dozen to where they intended to wring from him a large sum of gold, or kill him—"

"Kill him?" cried Miss Doolittle, in a tone of horror.

"Yes, madam; but they were attacked by the scouts, Sir Barry Greyfield was rescued, and those of the band who were not killed were captured, excepting several, I believe, who made good their escape."

"Bravo for Buffalo Bill," almost shouted Mr. Markham.

"And the League of Three," smiled Madge.

"Yes, bravo for the gallant trio that mastered the Devil's Dozen; but continue, captain, and pardon our interruptions, please."

"I have little more to tell, sir, other than that Buffalo Bill agreed with me to take Sir Barry on to Omaha, and turn him over to Richard Eyster, esquire, my attorney, who would see that he had every care until my return, when I would send him under proper charge back to England."

"That is the best that could be done."

"I thought so, as Cody was carrying his prisoners there, for the reward offered upon the heads of all of the Devil's Dozen."

"Will Mr. Cody take blood-money?"

The question was asked by Madge Markham in her quiet way, and yet the arched eyebrows showed she seemed surprised that the scout would do so.

"Oh, yes, for these scouts are as anxious to become rich as are the rest of mankind," returned Captain Enders.

"I do not believe it of Mr. Cody, however, nor of the two men who were his allies on this trail."

"Still, Miss Markham, that is what he told me he was taking the prisoners to Omaha for, and also for another purpose."

"And may I ask what that is?"

"To hang them."

"Doubtless their crimes deserve it."

"Indeed they do, and the League of Three, as you call Cody and his companions, have done the country a service that should be appreciated."

"I agree with you, Captain Enders; but did you then come on alone to the ranch?" asked Mr. Markham.

"I did, sir, as I was hurried by business affairs in England, demanding my almost immediate return."

"No, no; you certainly are not going to leave us so soon?" said Mr. Markham.

"I am necessarily compelled to do so, sir."

"But what can call you back so soon, when we have just met you?"

"You know my broken leg detained me a long time, and my leave from my regiment is about up, while my business affairs have to be settled in one way or another; but in those affairs both you and your daughter are concerned, Mr. Markham, and in justice to you I must lay the whole affair before you both, and then my decision as to my future course shall at once be made."

Madge flushed slightly but remained silent, Miss Doolittle looked all curiosity, while Mr. Markham, in a somewhat nervous manner, said:

"We will be all attention, my dear captain, to hear all that you have to say."

CHAPTER LXI.

THE HEIR AND THE HEIRESS.

"To give you fully the cause of my return, Mr. Markham, which, as I said, must be immediate, I will have to relate to you fully the terms of your brother's will," said Captain Enders.

"Certainly, sir; for I should be glad to know more than poor Daniel's letter and the one from the lawyer made known to us."

"My noble adopted father, Mr. Markham, felt that he had done wrong in not making my mother his wife in the long ago, and allowing her to marry another."

"To repair this wrong, as he considered it, he adopted her only child, myself, when he learned that I was left alone in the world."

"He also considered that he had wronged you, and he wished to set his conscience at rest upon that score too, so made up his mind to make your daughter joint heir, with myself, of his vast property."

"He ascertained in some way that Miss Markham's affections were not interested in any particular person, and he bluntly asked me if I was in love."

"My answer was a negative one, and he at once said he would redeem the past, and make your old age happy, by giving you two children instead of one."

"I was, believe me, no party to this decision, though by silence made no remonstrance to it, and his will read that we, Miss Markham and myself, were to be joint sharers of his wealth, whether we were *volens volens*!"

"But I regret, for the sake of Miss Markham, that he made the inheritance compulsory."

"May I ask in what respect?" said Madge.

"It was that we should only inherit it in case of our marriage."

"And I have not had the slightest thought of matrimony, nor do I expect to," laughed Madge.

"Nor have I loved, Miss Markham, and I am glad to know your feelings," remarked the captain.

"What is the estate worth, Captain Enders?"

"Very nearly a million."

"Indeed?"

"Yes."

"So much?" asked Mr. Markham.

"Yes, sir."

"Then our separate shares would be something over four hundred thousand dollars."

"Yes, Miss Markham, nearly, if not quite, a hundred thousand pounds."

"And do you intend to marry, sir, to get your share?" asked Madge, with a light laugh.

"That depends."

"Upon what, may I ask?"

"Yourself."

"I do not understand."

"The will compels us to marry, if we would inherit the fortune."

"So you before said, sir; but, I really do not know whom to set my affections upon."

"You do indeed misunderstand me," said Captain Enders, in an embarrassed way.

"Then pray be more explicit."

"Your uncle selected whom we both were to marry."

"Indeed! he was generous in giving away hearts and hands as he did his gold," and there was a sneer in the tone of the maiden.

The captain's face flushed, but he said firmly:

"Miss Markham, my adopted father hoped that his will might be carried out, and, as to whether it was or not, I assure you, I was wholly indifferent, until I met you."

"Now, knowing you even though ever so slightly, I do hope that the will will be obeyed, and that you may become my wife."

Madge Markham started at this direct appeal, and for the first time realized fully that she must marry Captain Eugene Enders to inherit her fortune.

He was *distingue*-looking, winning in manner, a gentleman certainly, and a man to win the heart of almost any susceptible maiden; but still she did not like him even yet; though she did not dislike him.

For her father's sake she had come to the Far West to bury herself, though she would gladly have roamed the world over, and she knew that she could reign as a queen among women, go where she might.

But to get a fortune by putting on chains that might cut deep into her heart, she did not feel like doing.

She saw her father's eager look, and asked calmly:

"If we do not marry each other, Captain Enders?"

"The fortune is lost to us both."

"Ah!"

"Yes, it goes to charity."

"A deserving use to make of it, certainly."

"Very true."

"And will its loss break your heart?"

"It will not hurt me, I frankly confess to you, Miss Markham, in the presence of witnesses, as will the loss of your love, which I had hoped to have won after seeing you."

"You are honest at least, Captain Enders."

"I always wish to be, Miss Markham, with you, and I now tell you frankly to decide against the fortune, if it pains you to take me with it."

"You are generous and noble, sir, and I know not what to answer you."

"What shall it be, father?" and the maiden seemed sorely worried.

"I decide in favor of the captain, my child, for I believe he is a man to make your married life very happy."

"Well, Captain Enders, I decide as my father wishes."

"But I must have a year's time."

The captain was plunged from joy to despair in an instant, for he said in a voice that trembled:

"Unfortunately, my dear Miss Markham, the will sets a date for our marriage."

"Indeed! my good uncle left nothing undone then."

"But what was the date, Captain Enders?"

"My broken leg, you know, detained me for months, so that I could not make you aware of all before, in person, though I wrote your father fully."

"But the date, sir?"

"For your sake, I regret to say that the limit of time is to-morrow night."

Madge sprung to her feet, her father seemed greatly worried, Miss Doolittle fairly groaned, so greatly was she shocked, and Pepper looked amazed.

"No, no, no, this cannot be," cried Madge.

"As you please, Miss Markham; all rests with you," came in the low tones of Captain Enders.

Then followed a long and earnest conversation, and, urged by her father, and the necessity of the captain's immediate return to England, Madge consented to the marriage.

It was decided then to send to a minister, who had a small ranch twenty miles away, and get him to perform the ceremony, and the following afternoon the gallant captain and his bride, hardly acquainted with each other, were to start for Omaha, and thence on to New York to sail for England, under an escort of cowboys, while Mr. Markham was to remain upon the ranch, with Miss Doolittle as housekeeper.

"My fate may be a sad one, but poor papa's will be far worse, be mine what it may, for that woman will marry him, I know," murmured poor Madge, as she lay down to rest that night.

CHAPTER LVII.

UNINVITED GUESTS.

THE REVEREND ABIJAH GRIM exactly suited his name in appearance, though there was a "twinkle of fun" in him, "the boys" said, when he left off his pious face for a run on the prairie with a gay party.

He had been an itinerant preacher for some years, and in that time, going through the Western States, had managed to "lay up treasures on ear h," as well as those his good conduct was storing away for him in heaven, for he was a really good man.

He had married a widow, whose husband had been a cattle-man, and he had gone to the Nebraska ranch of his wife to live.

But soon after his bride had departed this life to join her former husband, and the Reverend Abijah Grim was left a widower, with a comfortable home, a few hundreds of heads of

cattle, and several wicked cowboys to look after.

Now and then he would preach to scant audiences from the neighboring ranches, with a sprinkling of Indians thrown in, and Don Caesar, *alias Coon*, who had listened to one of his sermons, had been urging Mr. Markham to visit him.

This was the man, then, who was sent for to come to Sunset Rest Ranch, to make the beautiful Madge Markham the wife of a man she hardly knew, that the will of the eccentric Daniel Markham might be carried out to the letter.

The Reverend Grim arrived, accompanied by two cowboys from his ranch, as an escort, and Coon, who had begged the permission of going after him.

"He am a widdier, Miss Doo'l," he whispered to the old-maid housekeeper, whose name he always cut short as above.

Miss Doolittle smiled, and Coon continued:

"He am de boss preacher, too, an' his wife done lef' him rich."

This second remark pleased the old maid the more, and the Reverend Abijah was received with a grace and welcome that did his soul good.

He was shown to his room, and there got a welcome from Mr. Markham that made his heart glad, for he was invited to get up an appetite for dinner by a drink of old Bourbon, which, not being a strict teetotaler, he did not refuse.

"Providence provides many luxuries for us, sister Doolittle," he said to the old maid, who came in and caught him smacking his lips over "three fingers of whisky straight."

The "appetizer" had the effect of making the parson enjoy his dinner, and he unbent from his pious dignity, and told many good stories of his life of itinerant preaching, at which both Madge and Captain Enders laughed heartily.

An hour after dinner Madge appeared in the sitting room, ready for the ceremony.

She was dressed in her riding habit, and looked very lovely, yet pale, for she found it no easy task to leave all for a man she hardly knew.

A party of cowboys were to accompany the couple to Omaha, and Pepper was to go in the ambulance, which Mr. Markham insisted upon sending for the especial use of his daughter.

The captain seemed nervously anxious to get off, and the party assembled in the sitting room.

Madge leaned almost heavily upon the arm of her father, and at onesided Captain Enders and Miss Doolittle.

In front of them was the Reverend Abijah Grim, book in hand, and behind him was Pepper, then Coon and Phillis, and half a score of cowboys stood on the piazza and in the doorway.

"Is all ready, Brother Markham?" asked the parson of Mr. Markham, but with a look under his glasses at Miss Doolittle, who smiled sweetly and bowed.

"All are ready, sir," answered Mr. Markham.

"Then we shall proceed with the ceremony at once, as Captain Enders seems anxious to be away on his bridal tour."

"Allow me to interrupt you, sir."

All started as the deep tones fell upon their ears, and Captain Enders turned deadly pale, and he faced quickly about, his hand dropping upon his revolver.

"Let go that weapon, sir, for you are covered, and your death will follow a movement to draw."

The words were stern and ringing, the speaker terribly in earnest, for he had his revolver leveled at the head of Captain Enders, and certainly he was one whom no one present had expected at the wedding, while behind him were other uninvited guests, all armed and determined-looking.

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE END OF THE LONG TRAIL.

"BUFFALO BILL!"

That name broke in a hissing, savage tone, such as might come from an angry snake, from the lips of Captain Eugene Enders, as he stood like one spellbound before the scout.

The name was also upon the lips of Mr. Markham, with surprise, and Madge uttered it almost breathlessly.

Like a statue he stood upon the spot to which he had strode, when his words broke upon the astonished ears of all present, and his face wore a smile, calm, triumphant, and habitual to him in moments of danger and success.

Behind him were two others, also well known to the reader, and to those present.

One was—Wild Bill.

The other was—Texas Jack.

Wild Bill's face was stern and calm, his manner cold and dignified; but far back in his piercing eyes dwelt a dangerous look that boded evil to some one.

Texas Jack was, as usual, light-hearted and smiling, his manner free and easy, and his bearing reckless.

Like Buffalo Bill, they both held revolvers in

their hands, and their appearance indicated that they had ridden hard to get there.

"My dear Cody, you are certainly welcome, but why is it you assail my guest and intended son-in-law?" said Mr. Markham, in a tone of reproach.

"I'll be answerable, sir, for all I do against that man," was the stern response.

"But, Cody—"

"Yes, brother Cody, you should go slow, for—"

"Parson Grim, you mean well, and so does Mr. Markham; but I know what I am about in this matter, and I say right here that that man is an impostor."

He pointed to Captain Enders, who hissed forth:

"Liar!"

"I never quarrel with a man over his own grave, sir, so I will have no words with you, but go on to prove that you are not what you represent yourself."

"I am Captain Eugene Enders, of England."

"You are not."

"I repeat, I am."

"I say you are not."

"Then where is he?"

"Here!"

Wild Bill quickly stepped out of the door and in came the very man who had before claimed to be Captain Eugene Enders.

"Bah! that is the madman, Sir Barry Greyfield," sneered the one claiming to be Captain Enders.

All eyes were turned upon the new-comer, and in his quiet way he said:

"I am Eugene Enders, a captain of dragoons in the English army, and my words are susceptible of proof."

"You are Sir Barry Greyfield, who went mad and claimed that he was Eugene Enders," shouted the other.

"My friends, I am Eugene Enders, detained from visiting you, Mr. Markham, long ago, by a broken leg, which kept me in camp."

"My letters and those of my lawyer to you, in some way fell into the hands of that man, and he played a daring game to get my fortune, and win that young girl, but he has been thwarted, thank heaven, by this bold scout, Buffalo Bill, and his two friends."

"Great God! is this mystery ever to be cleared up?" cried Mr. Markham, utterly bewildered, while poor Madge sunk upon the sofa, hardly able to stand, and Miss Doolittle made an effort to faint, but was not encouraged by any one springing forward to catch her, so desisted.

"This gentleman, sir, is the true one, as I can prove, and I will tell you my motives for so believing."

"My two pards here, and I took the trail of the kidnapers of this gentleman, headed them off in the hills, at a place known as Death Camp, and saw them *bury alive*, by orders of that man, Captain Eugene Enders."

"We rescued him by digging from a cave beneath his grave, attacked the Devil's Dozen, and took two prisoners for keeps, and were content with the scalps of the rest."

"Bring in those gallows crows, Bill."

Wild Bill at once entered, accompanied by two of the Devil's Dozen securely bound.

"Now, Mr. Markham, I have promised these two fellows to let them go, though they should be hanged, if they would tell the whole truth."

"They promise to do so, and then I shall give them their ponies, a revolver each, and if I ever catch them in Nebraska again, they shall be buried alive in one of the open graves in the Death Camp."

All shuddered at the words of Buffalo Bill, and the two wretches became livid with horror and fright.

"Now, who is that man?"

Buffalo Bill addressed one of the two prisoners.

"I know him as Kiowa Carl," said one.

"Our guide?" almost shrieked Mr. Markham.

"Yes, sir; and now, my man, who do you know this man to be?"

Buffalo Bill spoke to the second outlaw, who answered:

"I know him to be a murderer and a forger in the East."

"You were comrades in crime, then?"

"Yes; we entered into some little games together."

"To get money?"

"Yes."

"And were compelled to take life to cover up your guilty tracks?"

"Yes."

"But were found out?"

"We were."

"And fled to the border to save your worthless lives?"

"We did."

"And have gone from bad to worse ever since?" continued the inexorable questioner.

"It seems so."

"What was his name when you knew him?"

"Ray Granger."

"Oh, God! at last—at last!"

All started at the ringing cry that broke so suddenly upon them, and even the accused man,

who had stood white, silent, with folded arms, gazing upon his accusers, turned toward the one who had uttered the cry.

It was Pepper, and he reeled, tottered, and Buffalo Bill sprung forward to catch him, thinking he would fall.

But by a mighty effort of self-control he recovered himself, and cried:

"At last the long trail is ended, and, Ray Granger, I will see you hanged, thank God, for the murder of my poor father!"

"Your father?" gasped the man, in a tone of horror.

"Yes, villain, for I am Belle Bonner, your wife!"

CHAPTER LIX.

PEPPER'S STORY.

THE accused man stood like one suddenly stricken with a lightning stroke.

His arms were held out before him, as though he would keep back some phantom seen only by himself.

His face was livid, and the veins stood out like whip-cords, while his chest rose and fell convulsively, and his teeth chattered.

He was harmless then to draw a weapon, and stepping forward quickly, although he retreated, Pepper took his weapons from his belt saying, quietly:

"He is better when his claws are out."

"You are Belle Bonner?" he gasped forth at last, while all present stood looking on with rapt attention.

"I am," and turning to Mr. Markham, Pepper continued in a voice that quivered painfully:

"Forgive me, Mr. Markham, for imposing upon you as a boy, when I am in reality a woman, and the wife of that wretch."

"He won my love in the long ago, and I married him."

"He had professed to be rich, but was worth only what he won by gambling."

"I was an only child and an heiress to a snug fortune, and he began to gamble it away."

"At last my father remonstrated, he begged forgiveness, pledged reform, and was taken into the firm as a head clerk."

"All seemed to go well for awhile, but then there came trouble, for money had been drawn on forged checks, and the cashier traced it to Ray Granger, and that man whom I now recognize as Walter Sloan, also a clerk in the firm of my father."

"He laid a trap for them in the store at night, and fell into it himself, for they killed him to escape."

"Knowing that all would come out next day, Ray Granger told Walter Sloan to go and make all arrangements for their flight, and that he would get money to fly with."

"He knew that my poor father kept considerable money in the safe at home, and also my mother's jewels, and this he intended to rob."

"He crept into the house, opened the safe in the library with a false key, and had seized the roll of bills, when my father came down for a book, for he had been unable to sleep for worry."

"He recognized the robber, and was instantly shot down, while Ray Granger made his escape."

"But he lived long enough to tell who was the thief and his murderer, and when I arrived from my pretty cottage home, I heard from his lips that my husband had killed him."

"My father died before dawn, and the officers of the law were put on the trail of the murderers."

"But they made their escape, as you all see."

"My mother never recovered the shock, and the firm of Bonner & Co. had been so hurt financially by the conduct of that man that after the estate was settled I had but little left."

"My mother's death, added to all else, made me revengeful, and I determined to track down Ray Granger and give him over into the clutches of the law for punishment."

"It has been a long trail, and I have roamed this border over in my search, for his disguises have been so complete, and he has so changed, for he was a mere boy in years then, that I did not know him, though at times that man's face has haunted me like an unpleasant dream."

"Now I am content, for, Ray Granger, the past will be avenged, and no longer will I have to unsex myself in the garb of a man."

She ceased speaking, and Madge quietly held forth her hand to the unfortunate woman, and crossing over to her she sunk down by her upon the sofa and burst into tears, touching all with her bitter grief, excepting the cruel man, who had now regained his composure, and stood silent and grim in their midst.

CHAPTER LX.

BUFFALO BILL TEARS OFF ANOTHER MASK.

FOR some moments after the telling of her story, Belle Bonner, or rather Mrs. Ray Granger, broke the silence that fell upon all, only by her sobs.

Then Buffalo Bill said, as though to break the spell:

"You have heard all, Mr. Markham?"

"I have," was the low reply.

"And believe?"

Mr. Markham at once stepped forward, his hand extended, and said:

"Captain Enders, forgive me, but the shadow upon you seemed so real that it deceived us all."

The English officer grasped the outstretched hand and said pleasantly:

"All is forgiven, sir, I assure you, for circumstances pointed fearfully against me."

"And I, too, crave forgiveness," said Madge, frankly.

"Granted, and the past shall be forgotten as soon as I see that man hanged for his crimes."

"It will be very soon forgotten, then," muttered Wild Bill, with a significant glance at his two pards, and the wondering cowboys.

"Yes, his last sun has set," murmured Texas Jack.

"And to you, Cody, we owe all," and Mr. Markham turned to Buffalo Bill, while coming forward Madge grasped his hand, and said in a voice that quivered:

"Again you have saved me, and this time—Oh, from what have you not saved me?"

"Oh! I was simply following a trail, Miss Markham, and with my two pards here, Bill and Jack, simply run the fox to earth, so we deserve no thanks," answered Buffalo Bill in his off-hand way.

But he did get thanks, and apparently to check the intense ardor of Miss Doolittle, he said:

"But my task is not yet finished, Mr. Markham."

"Oh! is there more?" groaned Miss Doolittle.

"Yes, for although you know this man in his real characters of Ray Granger, murderer and forger, and Kiowa Carl, renegade and secret chief of the Devil's Dozen, he yet has figured under another *alias* that he has worn most thoroughly to the deception of all."

"You surprise me, Cody," said Mr. Markham.

"Yes, for what else can he be?" asked Madge.

"Can he be even more vile at heart than you have already proven him, brother Cody?" queried Parson Grim, and Miss Doolittle smiled her appreciation of the question of Abijah Grim and the manner of putting it.

"Yes, he is even worse than you yet think him."

"Tell us all, Cody," urged Mr. Markham.

"I will, sir, and I admit it was hard for me to believe; but I found a retreat not far from here on the Platte, that carried me out in suspicions which I had formed."

"This man has played a desperately bold game, Miss Markham, to win you, and I am happy that he has been foiled at every move."

"Bad, I say, as you know him to be, he is even worse, and were Cripple Kit here he could verify my words."

"Do you mean that Cripple Kit knew this man in his real light?" asked Mr. Markham.

"I do, sir."

"No, no, that poor wretch would never have deceived us, Mr. Cody," said Madge.

"Miss Markham, let me tear another mask from the face of this man, for Ray Granger, Kiowa Carl, and the pretended Captain Eugene Enders, is none other than Cripple Kit."

This startling accusation of Buffalo Bill fell like a bombshell upon all, and every eye was turned from the face of the scout to that of the accused.

He met the gaze with a sneering smile and in silence.

"Impossible!" said Mr. Markham, after a while.

"It is true, sir, for I have traced that man's trail to the end."

"He went to Omaha, and to elude detection disguised himself as a hunchback, and bending his leg pretended to be a cripple."

"But he could not assume such lameness, for his leg was all drawn up," urged Mr. Markham.

"Oh, yes, for see here how easy it is," and with consummate acting Buffalo Bill bent his stately form, crooked one leg, and with the air of a slave, humble and cringing, walked across the room.

"All you need, Mr. Cody, is the face and the hump on the back," said Madge.

"The real face I am thankful I cannot get, but the hump I can."

"Let us have the hump, Jack."

Texas Jack stepped out of the room, and almost immediately returned with a large bundle.

Opening it, Buffalo Bill revealed the rig of Cripple Kit, even to the very hump.

Then there were many other things, a few letters, arms, the articles taken from Captain Eugene Enders, and Buffalo Bill remarked:

"The horse the pretended cripple rode away I also have, Mr. Markham, and here are the letters written you by the captain here, and the Omaha attorney, with the photograph, and all fell into the clutch of that man."

"Now you see who it was that killed the mail-courier, and how this villain got all of his plans to play the part of Captain Enders."

"He is really great in plots of devilry, and would have been a great man had he turned his talent in an honest channel."

"As it is, he went on the wrong trail, and it has run his head into a noose."

"You will take him to Omaha for trial, brother Cody, I suppose, and I will be there to snatch the brand from the burning at the last moment, and send his soul to glory," whined Parson Grim.

"He has been tried right here, parson, found guilty, and we decided that he must die, and the sooner his life ends the better.

"Come, sir."

There was no need of appeal, and the man knew it.

There was no voice to ask mercy for him, and Miss Doolittle's attempt was frowned down so suddenly she was frightened.

Parson Grim, feeling that he must do his duty, followed the doomed man, as he walked away between a guard of cowboys, but was consigned to such warm quarters for his good intentions that he shrunk back into the house and allowed Miss Doolittle to fan him.

With a bow of apology to Madge, Captain Enders followed, and Mr. Markham did likewise, and the poor young wife attempted to do so, but tottered, and with a cry sunk down upon the steps, and Madge sprang to her aid.

There upon the piazza stood the little group, Madge, with the young wife's face hidden on her shoulder, Miss Doolittle fanning the parson vigorously, and Phillis, for the latter had been deserted by Coon, who went with the party of men.

Slowly toward the river the men went, the doomed man in their midst, and at last they halted beneath a large tree, a lariat was thrown over a limb, and the other end, with a noose, was placed around the neck of the condemned wretch.

"Kiowa Carl, have you anything to say why you should not be hanged for your crimes?" asked Buffalo Bill.

"I am being murdered," was the low response.

"That is not true, for I am a legalized Justice of the Peace, and these men have proven you guilty, and in this country a man condemned to die is safer in the grave than in the jail, so I pronounce your doom, which is, at the end of five minutes, you be hanged to that tree until you are dead, and may Heaven have mercy upon your crime-stained soul."

"Amen!"

The words came in deep tones from the lips of Captain Eugene Enders, and then all stood in silence awaiting for the minutes to go by.

With hands tied behind his back, his feet bound, the noose around his neck, and the other end held by the cowboys of Sunset Rest ranch, the man stood, not a movement indicating fear, and his face revealing only disappointment that his cruel and devilish plots had not succeeded.

"Bandage his eyes, Platte Paul, for the time is up," said Buffalo Bill.

Captain Enders gave his handkerchief for the purpose, and the order was obeyed.

A signal then followed, and up into the air was dragged the guilty wretch.

Hardly had his feet left the prairie, when Buffalo Bill turned to the two outlaw prisoners, and said, sternly:

"Now begone, both of you, for your horses await you there, and remember my warning."

They seemed to hesitate, as though to thank him, but seeing that he was growing impatient, they bounded away, and the last of the band known as the Devil's Dozen fled to seek other scenes far from the Nebraska plains, but never to forget the narrow escape they made from dancing out of life at the end of a rope.

CONCLUSION.

TRUE to his pledge to the dying renegade, White Panther, Buffalo Bill sought out, upon his first visit to the East, the daughter to whom he had left his inheritance, and the trinkets he had taken with him to the border when he fled, a murderer, and believing his wife false to him.

That child never knew the sad fate of her father, for the noble scout breathed to her not one word to cast a shadow upon her, and the gold he gave her, over the amount he had found in the renegade's belt, she little dreamed was the reward paid him for taking that father's life.

Upon his trip East Buffalo Bill accompanied Captain Eugene Enders and his bride, the beautiful Madge Markham, and saw them off on the steamer for old England.

But the captain had fallen in love with America, as with an American girl, and sold out his interest in England, and is now named among the famous cattle-kings of Nebraska, and with an heir to his wealth, who answers to the name of Cody Enders, and who is a prairie-born boy who has Buffalo Bill for his greatest of all heroes, as well as his godfather.

Miss Doolittle having inveigled Parson Abijah Grim into the matrimonial traces, departed from Sunset Rest ranch, leaving Belle Bonner, for she had resumed her maiden name, to step into her shoes as housekeeper, and when Captain Enders and Madge returned from England, they found that Mr. Markham had married the lovely young widow, and they were glad that it was so, for they indorsed both Coon and Phillis in the assertion that:

"She am de sweetestest luddy in de world, ef

she did w'ar britches ter hunt down dat old fox husban' o' hern."

As for Buffalo Bill, history holds his name too brightly before the world's face to need more said of him here, and his two pards, Wild Bill and Texas Jack are now

"Sleeping the sleep
That knows no waking,"

and their death broke the link that bound together in life the League of Three.

THE END.

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- 21 INDIGNANT POLLY WOG and 59 other Songs.
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